AntAgonistic insights

Evolving Soviet Atheist Critiques of Religion and Why They Matter for Anthropology

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Abstract: This article offers a critique of the common notion in contemporary anthropology that a positive attitude toward the people under study is a necessary precondition for a sophisticated understanding of their social world. The empirical sociology of religion that evolved during the last decades of the Soviet Union's existence started from the premise that religion was a harmful phenomenon slated for disappearance. Nonetheless, atheist sociologists produced increasingly complex accounts of religious life in modern socialist societies. Their ideological framework simultaneously constrained Soviet scholars and forced them to pay closer attention to religious phenomena that contradicted political expectations. Drawing on this extreme example of militant atheist scholarship, I argue that studying 'repugnant cultural others' always requires some form of affective motivation. Antagonism can be as powerful, and as problematic, a motivating force as empathetic suspension of judgment.

Keywords: anthropology, atheism, communism, empathy, empirical research, religious studies, sociology, Soviet Union

What can an atheist know about religion? Can the study of religion, rather than presupposing methodological 'suspension of disbelief', draw on obligatory unbelief? It is relatively uncontroversial to claim that a measure of critical distance from the object of study helps to analyze it more thoroughly and even-handedly. But the so-called scientific atheism of the Soviet Union and other socialist states seems to have taken distance a step too far and is unlikely to rank high on anyone's list of helpful approaches to the study of religion. As Marianna Shakhnovich (2006: 181) notes in her history of Soviet religious studies, many of its erstwhile practitioners and younger Russian successors now treat the discipline as hopelessly tainted by its atheist perspective.[1] And long after the end of the Cold War, English-language literature still cites the state-sponsored atheism of socialist states as an example of the stubborn blindness of secularist regimes to the reality of religious persistence (Froese 2008).

The commitment of entire states and their ruling parties to enforcing atheism and ostracizing religious believers certainly led to much suffering, bloodshed, and injustice, especially in the initial phases of destroying the institutional power of religious organizations. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, whole families of priests, imams, rabbis, lamas, and devout lay people were exterminated. During the height of persecution in 1921–1922, 1929–1930, and again in the late 1930s, putting down one's name on the list of 20 lay members required for the registration and legal functioning of a religious congregation was virtually a death sentence. At the outbreak of World War II, only three senior hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church were alive and not imprisoned in a labor camp (Mitrofanov 2002).

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[1] For the sense of perfunctory emptiness emanating from atheist institutions toward the end of the perestroika period, see Bruce Grant's (2011) account of the virtually abandoned House of Scientific Atheism in Moscow in the spring of 1989.

Atheist campaigns during those decades focused on the destruction of sacred sites and buildings and the public humiliation of clergy and religious believers (Greene 2009; Husband 2000). Rapidly enforced new norms of time, behavior, and dress made people overstep traditional religious norms and prohibitions, such as the cycle of fasts and feasts of Orthodox Christianity, the wearing of veils and other forms of head coverings, and the avoidance of burial grounds, many of which were deliberately turned into public parks (Dragadze 1993; Northrop 2004; Rolf 2006). As in settings of rapid and state-enforced secularization elsewhere in the world, the requirement to publicly reject and ridicule old norms served to underscore the point that religious commitments were incompatible with membership in the new society that was in the making (Bantjes 1997; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Copeman and Quack, this issue).

Those parts of Eastern Europe that came under socialist influence after World War II followed suit in their own battles between political regimes and institutional religion, although sometimes in less violent forms (Gärtner et al. 2003). The requirement to be atheist was so closely associated with Marxist politics that socialist parties in the Global South 'translated' it into their cultural contexts (see Blanes and Paxe, this issue). In the Soviet Union itself, the initial open violence against religious believers was replaced by restrictions and intimidation during the post-war decades. Some members of younger generations grew up with little exposure to religion as a complex of practices and acquired the 'dispositional atheism' described by Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic (this issue). But for scholars and officials in socialist states, atheism always remained more than a heuristic stance toward the possibility or impossibility of religious experience. Anyone who gathered and disseminated information about religious traditions and practices had to present this work as contributing to religion's eventual disappearance.

Despite the political mandate to help exterminate religion, many Soviet atheists recognized empirical challenges to the expectation of inevitable secularization. The way that they dealt with these challenges has implications for current debates about the knowability of religion through the lens of the social sciences. After World War II, the communist parties of Eastern Europe to some degree resigned themselves to the persistence of religious institutions. With the exception of Albania, the world's only officially atheist state, all socialist governments offered religious organizations more or less restrictive conditions under which they could legally register and created specialized bureaucracies for monitoring religious life (Chumachenko 2002; Sˌincan 2010). By the 1950s and 1960s, the capacity of religious believers to adapt their dogmas and organizational structures to the requirements of a changing social world attracted the attention of officials and scholars alike.

For Marxists committed to the idea that being determines consciousness, the normative expectation remained that religious attachments would eventually disappear from the lives of socialist citizens. With the exception of institutions of theological learning, which passed on textual and liturgical knowledge with little comparative or theoretical research, 'scientific atheism' remained the only heading under which knowl-

edge about religion could be gathered, analyzed, and discussed in public settings. In Soviet writings about religion from the post-war decades, one feels what Ranajit Guha (1988), referring to British descriptions of Indian peasant uprisings, has called the 'prose of counter-insurgency', that is, the definition of a social phenomenon as hostile and foreign to the values of those authoring the description, and the attempt to define the motivations of the actors for the purpose of defeating or dissuading them.

Looking at atheist debates from the Soviet Union, one sees that the obligatory hostile stance toward religion certainly limited the interpretive possibilities of scholars and officials. But the ideological puzzle of why religion was not going away also motivated increasingly complex inquiries into the religious practices of socialist citizens. Contrary to what critiques of secularism as a rigid and restrictive system of thought might lead us to expect,[2] there were significant innovations within Soviet atheist critiques of religion over the last decades of Soviet socialism, all growing out of the effort to understand what religion meant to citizens and how to replace it most effectively.

For contemporary anthropology, atheist scholarship on religion can be a useful antidote to an assumption that has gained ground in recent decades— the idea that a positive emotional attitude toward research subjects necessarily leads to deeper insights into their world than a critical or even neutral stance. Methodological discussions of ethnographic fieldwork acknowledge a range of emotional responses by the researcher, oscillating between admiring identification and fearful withdrawal (Davies and Spencer 2010; Kleinman and Copp 1993). But as narratives for presenting fieldwork data, stories of overcoming doubt and distance through sharing emotional experiences seem convincing to many anthropologists and their readers, at least in North America.[3] As I outline below, a number of Anglophone scholars of religion and secularism have argued that normative equations between secularity, modernity, and academic rationality inhibit empathy with religious practitioners and diminish our capacity to understand contemporary religious dynamics. By contrast, the development of empirical studies of religious life in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s shows that the imperative to be critical can be as powerful (and limiting) a motivation for attentive observation and astute analysis as the quest for sympathetic understanding.

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[2] Some of the most compelling critiques once again come from post-colonial studies, where secular conventions of politics and historiography are challenged for what they obscure about the histories and political motivations of colonized populations (Chakrabarty 2000; Nandy 1998). For anthropology, the most influential work has been that of Talal Asad, as discussed below.

[3] Across a distance of more than 20 years, there are similarities in narrative structure between Renato Rosaldo's (1989) classic account of how he came to understand Ilongot headhunters' talk of rage in a new way after the death of his wife and Tanya Luhrmann's (2012: 325) account of how sharing the visceral as well as the cognitive experiences of learning to be an evangelical Christian helped her experience "what I believe the Gospels mean by joy."

Ethnographic Empathy

The methodological stance of an empathetic sharing of the 'native's point of view' was implicit in the research methods of the first generation of participant observers in anthropology. Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and lesser-known predecessors such as Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai and Frank Hamilton Cushing argued that it is only through leaving the detachment of the armchair and sharing people's lives and daily concerns that one comes to understand their view of the world (Clifford 2005; Kohl 1979). The claim to privileged understanding came under critique from a new generation of Anglophone anthropologists toward the end of the twentieth century (Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986). But the participatory and dialogical approaches championed by some members of this generation tended to place even more value on positive emotions such as trust, friendship, and shared purposes between researchers and researched. If one needs to be bewitched in order to learn about witchcraft, or to befriend someone suffering from possession in order to write a rich account of this affliction, the premium placed on positive emotional connections is high (Crapanzano 1980; Favret-Saada 1977). In an early critical engagement with this trend toward empathy and suspension of disbelief, Ernest Gellner (1970) asserts that it sometimes turns the scholar's home society into the only legitimate object of criticism. This raises the problem of how to define what is one's home and how to separate it from the societies under study.

In the anthropology of religion, calls for methodological empathy often arise from just such a self-critical impulse. Some of the first challenges to the secularization thesis in anthropology came from studies of evangelical Christians, following the urge to demystify what had become the 'repugnant cultural other' (Harding 1991) of American liberal intellectuals. More recently, the post– Cold War and post-9/11 image of politicized Islam has prompted anthropologists to challenge the assumptions about proper politics and proper religion that underlie the demonization of certain religious movements as 'extremist' or 'fundamentalist' (Bilgrami 1992).

In her contribution to a forum on secularism, Saba Mahmood (2008: 448–449) repeatedly describes the public discourse on religion and the public sphere since September 11 as "shrill," framing anthropology's responsibility as one of inquiring into and rethinking "normative conceptions of the subject, law and language" and of laying bare "the epistemological and ontological assumptions" of self-described secular discourses. Her argument follows that of Talal Asad (2003, 2006), who has described liberal secularism as the outcome of a complex history of theological and political developments in Western Europe—a history that has also profoundly shaped the discipline of anthropology. Dissecting and critiquing secularism, in this interpretation, is an exercise in anthropological self-criticism that is a necessary step toward overcoming the Eurocentrism of the discipline.

As anthropologists Sherry Ortner (1995) and Webb Keane (2003) have noted, such self-critical stances toward histories of 'othering' and 'objectification' in anthropol-

ogy have had paradoxical consequences for the discipline's empirical commitment to describing and theorizing other people's lives. When Harding (1991) and Mahmood (2001) reflect on the paradoxes of the 'repugnant cultural other' and the 'docile agent', respectively, their central question concerns what the discourses about such fundamentalist others reveal about the ontological certainties of secular society. In a kind of 'ethnographic refusal' (Ortner 1995), they do not probe the interpersonal dynamics and social shifts that lead people to adopt or abandon religious orthodoxies. Rather, their focus is on tracing the genealogies of secularist myths about religious others. In Mahmood's (2005: 37) words, her own "repugnance" against the practices of the conservative Muslim Egyptian women she worked with led her to explore "the depth of discomfort [that] the pietistic character of this movement evokes among liberals, radicals, and progressives alike." Although several of the women had grown up in more secular families (ibid.: 176, 185), Mahmood offers little discussion about the changes in Egyptian society that accompany these shifts from more secular to more religious ways of being.

A second aspect of 'ethnographic refusal' in the anthropology of secularizing or post-secular societies is the dearth of ethnographic studies that include committed, secularist research subjects who are worthy of empathy. With the exception of some exploratory texts that begin to analyze ways in which secularism is lived (Farman 2013; Hirschkind 2011), Asad and his students approach the study of secularism as a way to develop a critique of liberalism. They focus their attention on clashes between religious and secularist stances in Western Europe, North America, and regions formerly colonized by Western Europe, such as the Middle East and India. The state-sponsored atheism of socialist Eastern Europe and northern Eurasia remains outside of their view, as does the broader question of how the militantly secularist movements of the twentieth century—in the Soviet Union and China, but also in Kemalist Turkey and Nehru's India—took Western ideas about normative historical development to build specific versions of modernity on the ruins of multi-ethnic, multi-religious empires (cf. Bhargava 1998b; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Khalid 2006).

Considering the history of claims about anthropology as an 'atheist' discipline explored by Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic (this issue; see also Blanes 2006), it may be that atheists in the field do not seem exotic enough to warrant ethnographic empathy. In a recent, critically acclaimed ethnography of evangelicals in the United States, Tanya Luhrmann (2012: xvi) sets out to build "a bridge across the divide" between unbelievers and believers. For her, this only involves explaining how believers learn to believe in God. She appears to assume that her readers know how non-believers think. When an anthropologist as a "professional infidel" (Faubion 2001: 30, 71) encounters

unbelief in the field, it still seems to be hard to see it as a cognitive stance and cultural way of life in need of explanation and investigation.[4]

In some ways, studying atheism in the Soviet Union is a convenient way out of the dilemma of the overly familiar. Although once imposed and promoted by an impressive apparatus of repression and propaganda, public avowals of atheist convictions have gone out of fashion since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, giving atheism the exotic appeal of a relic of past political moments. My archival studies and oral history interviews on atheist propaganda of the 1960s and 1970s in the Mari Autonomous Republic on the Volga revealed a fascinating mix of the familiar and the strange. Propagandists worried about how to explain to village audiences what proteins are and how life could have originated from them, while cultural professionals sought to design secular rituals in such a way that they would provide substitutes for the beauty of religious liturgies, but without overwhelming audiences emotionally in the way that religious practice supposedly did (Luehrmann 2011).

The ethical assumptions expressed by atheist propagandists—that the spread of atheism would eliminate barriers of ethnicity, age, and gender sustained by religious traditions, and would focus people's energies on their thisworldly responsibilities to a society of fellow human beings—seemed quaintly utopian in the context of my concurrent fieldwork among post-Soviet religious organizations. Here, I encountered returnees to ancestral religions who regretted the inter-religious and inter-ethnic marriages that they or their children had entered into during more secular times; evangelical converts who claimed that the only way to improve Russia's economy is to bring more people to Jesus; and the increasing confidence and cultural power of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the aftermath of decades of struggle between atheism and religiosity, it was not clear which side had hegemony over which. This allowed for a study that treated both sides as equally in need of explanation and focused on their mutually constitutive relationship.

Part of this evolving relationship between religion and non-religion in the Soviet Union was fueled by the development of empirical sociology during the second half of the twentieth century. Like their Western counterparts, atheist scholars focused on religious practitioners as repugnant others with puzzling practices and ideas. The political framework within which they worked forbade any hint at empathetic engagement. But upon reading their published works and archival transcripts of their debates, atheist scholars of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev era turn out to be quite reflexive about their work and ready to question its methodological and theoretical assumptions. While critical of their research subjects, they took considerable risks by pointing out that religious practices remained part of the lives of many Soviet citizens and by advocating

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[4] There are signs that non-religious people are being discovered as ethnographic subjects. In addition to the articles in this issue, this topic is being addressed in forthcoming works by Matthew Engelke and Lorna Mumford.

for theoretical models of historical development that would account for this. They thus present an interesting case study of an antagonistic stance toward research subjects.

Religion through an Atheist Lens

With the exception of a few legally recognized and carefully controlled centers of theological education, all scholarly inquiry on religion in the Soviet Union took place under the heading of 'scientific atheism' (Shakhnovich 2006). Some scholars who were formerly part of this discipline now claim that they were always interested in studying religion but had no other way to gain access to knowledge about it (Viktor Shnirelman, pers. communication, 2011). While it is impossible to evaluate such retrospective claims, the fact remains that all scholarly descriptions of religious life during the Soviet period had to situate themselves within a framework of expectation that religion would eventually disappear. Operating within these non-negotiable ideological constraints, university departments and research institutes dedicated to scientific atheism started to produce increasingly sophisticated empirical research on religious practices in the Soviet Union in the 1960s. One reason for this was the growing realization that, despite decades of socialist development, religion was not going away by itself and that previously promoted assumptions about religious believers could no longer hold true. Steady or even rising numbers of infant baptisms throughout the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, could hardly be explained by the notion that only class enemies and old people would continue to cling to religion under socialism (Lane 1978).

Especially when a new wave of anti-religious attacks during the early Khrushchev years failed to yield the desired effects, rising numbers of scholars called for more careful inquiry into what became known as 'the causes of the vitality of religious survivals in socialist society'. In spite of resistance from philosophers who held that empirical research could add no new insights to the truths expounded by Marxism-Leninism, this was a time when empirical sociology and ethnography were re-emerging as legitimate academic disciplines after having been virtually stamped out in the 1930s (First 2008; Luehrmann 2005; Slezkine 1991).

Scholars who advocated for a resumption of empirical studies argued that only living examples could show the processes by which new social relations and new people come into being. Some of the first studies began shortly before Stalin's death in 1953 and were conducted in villages with collectivized agriculture. As they began to publish results during the Khrushchev Thaw, scholars underscored the immense changes in social life and family structures that collectivization had brought about. An early outcome was the 1958 study *The Village of Viriatino in Past and Present*, published by a group of scholars from Moscow's Institute of Ethnography after two years of intermittent ethnographic research between 1952 and 1954 (Kushner 1958; see also Benet 1970). Themes of modernization and improvement loom large, but even in a study that was

designed to ask primarily about material culture, workdays, and family structure, the findings point to the theme of religious change and persistence.

Making inquiries about kinship and marriage practices, the ethnographers recorded memories of two early Communist Party activists from the 1920s. During this period, Communist Youth League members found brides who agreed to forego a church wedding, but their parents forced them into a compromise. Instead of holding the Russian Orthodox ceremony inside the church, the couples had to circle the church three times—a number denoting the Christian notion of the Trinity that was also familiar from Orthodox Christian ritual (Kushner 1958: 206). Starting in the late 1950s, studies of the lives of recent migrants to the expanding Soviet cities also showed the persistence of religiously inspired life-cycle rituals among populations whose rapidly changing material circumstances should, by Marxist standards, have transformed their consciousness equally rapidly (Urazmanova 2000).

Contrary to what is sometimes claimed (Shlapentokh 1987), these early experiments with empirical ethnography and sociology were conducted by scholars loyal to the government and the Communist Party who explicitly sought ways to make their studies seem relevant to the cause of communism. But the trend toward empirical studies and the erosion of historical-materialist certainties that ensued were not without critics. At a 1963 conference organized to discuss the first draft of a collectively authored book on the 'spiritual world' of Soviet citizens during the transition from socialism to full-fledged communism (Stepanian 1966), the economic philosopher Petr Nikolaevich Fedoseev warned in his opening statement that "facts from particular conversations with workers" could at best "enliven" an account of contemporary Soviet reality. However, it was the scholars' job to place those facts within the right philosophical and temporal framework: "[W]hat is needed is a philosophical sociological analysis from the angle of vision of what is happening, from the angle of vision of what is to come, what are the tendencies of development, and how we can practically assist in the education and formation of the new human being, in the development of the spiritual life of socialist society."[5]

Not surprisingly, given its politically sensitive nature, religion as an explicit topic of study emerged relatively late, and the scholars who examined it took special care to heed the call to place empirical data in the right "tendencies of development" to serve the "formation of the new human being." In 1964, the Moscow Academy of the Social Sciences, which was directly subordinate to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, established an Institute of Scientific Atheism. Its researchers soon began to conduct large-scale studies based on standardized questionnaires that covered themes such as everyday life, national traditions, culture, and religious beliefs. The first studies were carried out in the Penza Region in 1968–1970 and in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic in 1970–1971. In the Mari Republic, more than 600 rural teachers and employees of cultural institutions interviewed respondents in towns and villages

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[5] State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. R-9547, op. 1, d. 1314, l. 17, 9–11 May 1963.

in 1972– 1973. Variations followed in other Russian regions and Soviet republics over the course of the next four years, always with the assistance of local Communist Party members, who were largely responsible for administering the surveys (Pivovarov 1971, 1976; Smolkin-Rothrock 2009).

By linking questions about religious belief or its absence to questions about age, educational level, occupation, housing conditions, access to social and cultural services, and knowledge about and evaluation of ethnic traditions, these studies sought to find out why certain people participated in religious practices while others abandoned them. The reason for combining such a wide variety of topics in one questionnaire was twofold. First, the sociologists designing the surveys were well aware that people would try to please the interviewers and present themselves as more atheist than they really were, even if they were promised anonymity. Placing questions about religion at the end of a lengthy survey of more than 300 questions was meant to give the interviewer time to gain the trust of the respondent and receive more reliable answers (Solov'ev 1977: 13; 1987: 15).

The second purpose of the wide range of questions was to generate statistics that would serve as evidence of the superiority of atheist convictions. To achieve this goal, the sociologists correlated statements about the presence or absence of religious belief with other kinds of information contained in the survey. Through a method of regression analysis that was new in the Soviet Union at the time and included early forms of computer technology, atheists, when compared to believers, were shown to be more likely to participate in voluntary social service or trade union activities and to put the interests of society before their own (Solov'ev 1977: 100; 1987: 144–145). In the Mari Republic, the repeat survey in 1985 differentiated between atheists who had previously believed but then abandoned their religion and those who had never held any religious beliefs. Responses to such questions were correlated with information about age and place of birth (Solov'ev 1987: 30). The resulting data were meant to show the generational dynamics of the decline of religious belief and the growth of atheism, producing the view of 'dynamic tendencies' that was required of socialist statistics.

Despite the attempts to produce data that would be useful to the building of communism, the published results of this and other surveys openly challenged the idea that only ignorant or disloyal people would hold on to religious convictions. Instead, they presented conclusions that criticized party and government agencies for not providing enough cultural services for rural residents and failing to create more child care options for young parents, which left them with no choice but to give in to the demands of grandparents to baptize or circumcise their children (Sofronov 1973). Sociologists also raised difficult questions about the role of religious practice for members of ethnic minorities, hinting that for some people religion was connected to complicated communal loyalties, rather than being merely a false explanatory framework for the uneducated (Solov'ev 1977: 73–74; see also Luehrmann 2012).

Critical Attention

The project of talking to religious believers, asking them about their experiences and practices, and then publishing the results remained risky in the Soviet Union. But by the middle of the Brezhnev era, it had also acquired a measure of respectability, with the understanding that the ultimate purpose was the building of a secular communist society. At the discussion of the survey results at the Mari Republic's Communist Party plenum in 1975, the first secretary of the party fully acknowledged the unpleasant nature of some of the findings, only to turn them into a call to action for his subordinates. If 4.7 percent of teachers and 15.6 percent of medical professionals called themselves religious believers or people wavering between belief and unbelief, and if 15 percent of whitecollar workers had not read a single book during the month that the study was carried out and 26 percent of party members had icons in their home, the remedy was both further study and improved political education:

> A person who has linked his life to the party of Lenin, to please his mother-inlaw or whomever else, lives year in and year out under the god corner with the image of the mother of god or Nicholas the miracle worker, and we consider him an ideological fighter for the policies of the party ... We need a serious reorganization of the work on forming a scientific worldview, of atheist education, of the organization of the study of problems of atheism and religion by members of the Komsomol and Communist Party, by diverse groups of the intelligentsia, by all categories of toilers.[6]

Note that the party secretary calls for Komsomol and Communist Party members to study "problems of atheism and religion," giving political approval to scholarly attempts to generate and disseminate knowledge about religion. The speech still presents religious paraphernalia and rituals as aspects of past social relations that should be targeted for elimination. Yet the underlying force of that past no longer lies in the evil intentions of former elites and those bent on wrecking the economy; instead, it can be found in more intimate structures of familial authority and affection. The male party member is assumed to tolerate icons in the home to please his mother-in-law and perhaps, by extension, his wife.[7]

On the part of the sociologists, one conclusion emerging from the empirical studies was to explain the tenacity of religion within certain families and social groups by reference to isolation from the wider Soviet public sphere. Even after controlling for differences in age and urban or rural residence, the follow-up study still indicated that religious believers read fewer books per month and watched fewer films (Solov'ev 1987). Elderly rural residents interviewed in an earlier, small-scale study complained

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[6] State Archive of the Republic of Marii El (GARME), f. P-1, op. 41, d. 27, l. 32, 25 July 1975.

[7] See Northrop (2004: 176) for a discussion of the strategic advantages of such a feminization of religious beliefs for couples and atheist bureaucrats alike.

that there was no place for them to meet other than the church, because all activities in the village's clubhouse were geared toward young people (Sofronov 1973).

In a stark reversal of Emile Durkheim's ([1914] 1998) identification of society as the true referent of religious ideas and practices, Soviet atheists came to see religion as a fragmentizing, isolating force that thrived on boundaries and severed connections. They saw walls of authority that prevented the transfer of progressive ideas from younger to older generations; geographic and cultural distances that separated the countryside from the city; traditions of distrust and economic specialization that separated members of different ethnic groups. At a time when functionalist analyses of religion in the English-speaking world emphasized its role in providing social values (Parsons 1960), Soviet atheist scholars were at pains to show that morality did not originate from religion but was merely appropriated by religious thought. "[M]orality is secular in origin," insisted the elderly philosopher Nikolai Ivanovich Gubanov during a meeting of the executive board of the Knowledge Society. "We work on separating morality from religion in order to define and highlight secular morality."[8]

But was any of this atheism 'real'? Or were scholarly and popular professions of atheism just a pretense to protect the study and practice of religion from state sanctions? Between 1985 and 2004, many respondents to sociological surveys in the Mari Republic changed their professed views. The number of declared religious believers rose from 13.5 percent in 1985 to 43 percent in 1995 and 68.2 percent in 2004. The number of atheists fell from 32.2 percent in 1985 (70 percent if one adds those who indicated "indifference to matters of religion") to 16.6 percent in 2004 (Shabykov et al. 2005: 10, 346; Solov'ev 1987: 118). In Russia as a whole, the number of unbelievers remained around 20 percent in 2011, 20 years after the end of atheist propaganda (Levada Center 2012: 170). This suggests that, for some people at least, more was going on than just ideological show.

In 2005, I interviewed Viktor Solov'ev, the sociologist who carried out the surveys in the Mari Republic. He remained one of the few avowed atheists whom I was able to meet during my research. Born in 1934 in a remote Mari village, he had built his career by combining Communist Party work with scholarly inquiry and public lecturing. After retiring from sociological research, he served as an associate dean in the faculty of law at Mari State University, where he taught courses on church-state relations that encouraged students to question the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in contemporary Russia. Quick to acknowledge that his loyalty to atheism was unusual among his academic peers, he made fun of colleagues who had promoted atheism for most of their lives and now presented at the theological conferences that the local diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church organized in collaboration with various state agencies. For Solov'ev and many other observers, the motivations behind post-

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[8] GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 184, l. 19, 29 April 1958. See also GARF, f. R-9547, op. 1, d. 1311, l. 341–347, 20–23 February 1963. For more on Gubanov's work in the Knowledge Society, see Smolkin-Rothrock (2014).

Soviet professions and performances of religiosity are no less dubious than Soviet-era professions and performances of atheism.

Without getting too deeply into the issues of sincerity and knowledge of other people's beliefs, which constitute another difficult chapter in the history of anthropology (Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Wilson 1970), for the purposes of this article it is enough to note that even while declaring allegiance to atheism, empirical scholars of religion undertook politically and intellectually risky work. They documented and interpreted the views and, in some cases, the voices of religious believers, who in previous decades would at best have been ignored and at worst persecuted by representatives of the Soviet state. They insisted that there were ways of combining the minutiae of empirical data collection with an interest in dynamic tendencies and long-term change, and that the tendencies and changes in religious life spoke not merely of restriction and decline, but of adaptation and reactions to current social problems. Some "survivals," as a speaker of the 1963 conference on the spiritual life of socialist society put it, were not caused simply by "inertia." Instead, there were "phenomena even in the present that nourish this survival and reproduce it."[9] The ideological mystery of the causes of unexpected survivals thus motivated a closer look at the dynamics of socialist society. One speaker cited the spread of alcohol use into formerly tea-drinking Central Asia as a problem that was caused, rather than solved, by Soviet secularizing policies.[10]

Late Soviet observers of religion retained significant blind spots. Their own orientation toward persuading and mobilizing audiences led them to interpret religious practices and objects as analogous to propaganda tools: the beauty of ritual served above all to attract the attention of followers, while icons in homes helped to spellbind people. This interpretation ignored and distorted the practices of contemplation and material mediation of non-human presence that were part of Russia's religious heritage. For example, atheist scholars described Russian Orthodox religious imagery as the propaganda posters of the church. This interpretation ignored the visually inconspicuous nature of many icons, as well as the many non-visual means by which people interacted with them, such as touching, kissing, and gathering objects that had been in contact with them (Luehrmann 2010).

After decades of anthropological soul-searching, such creative misunderstandings, where scholars interpreted social phenomena in light of their own motivations, present no surprise. It is more remarkable that, remaining within an atheist framework, late Soviet scholars carved out a niche for the empirical study of religion under socialism. They challenged simplistic views of religion as an expression of ignorance or deceit, not out of an inherent sympathy toward religious believers, but in order to devise more effective secularizing policies while also creating legitimacy for themselves as empirical researchers.

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[9] GARF, f. R-9547, op. 1, d. 1314, l. 457, May 1963.

[10] Ibid., l. 286.

Conclusion: Uses of Antagonism

Through their insistence on the tensions between religious practice and full participation in a society of human contemporaries, Soviet scholars raised several points that are noteworthy for anthropologists of religion today. First, their empirical approaches challenged not only Marxist orthodoxy but also Durkheimian views of religion as a source of social cohesion that are still current among Western social scientists and are making a comeback in post-Soviet Russia. Accounts of secularization tend to be based on a historical narrative where aspects of modern society, such as morality, law, and medicine, progressively detach and differentiate from the religious foundations in which they were once embedded. By seeing religion as a parasitic latecomer exploiting human propensities for altruism and collaboration, Soviet atheist thought provides a useful corrective to automatic assumptions that religious phenomena always belong to a deeper past than their seeming secular counterparts.

Second, the more Soviet sociology moved away from explaining religion as merely a survival of feudal or capitalist social relations, the more sharply it defined religion as anti-social. Whereas a common worry in contemporary religious studies is that many of its approaches presuppose highly text-based and rationalistic religions such as Protestant Christianity, the Soviet insistence on regarding religion as the opposite of society seems to fit ascetic and world-renouncing religions much better (Asad 1993; Riesebrodt 2007). Soviet atheists confronted religious traditions that involved progressive withdrawal from the world in old age and premiums placed on ritual expenditure (Bernstein 2013; Luehrmann 2012; Rogers 2009). Taking up their intuition that religion pulls people away from human social bonds and everyday economic rationalities might be a step toward diversifying the forms of religiosity that inform theoretical models of religion.

Soviet atheists were certainly not alone in acknowledging the destructive edge that religious demands can add to political and social cleavages (Kapferer 1988; Orsi 2005). What distinguished them was that they combined the ethnographic virtue of close attention with a political commitment to changing what they saw—a strategy that many readers today would consider unprofessional. But today, as then, keeping one's gaze fixed on 'repugnant cultural others' seems to require affective resources of negative or positive charge. In times and places where the power imbalances between secular and religious actors are far less one-sided than they were in the Soviet Union, it seems important to retain the possibility of a critical stance and place it alongside more empathetic approaches to understanding.

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