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INTRODUCTION BY STEVEN E. HARRIS, UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON

Memorial dedication: This roundtable discussion is dedicated to the memory of Sonja Luehrmann (1975-2019). An accomplished anthropologist and historian, Luehrmann was a pioneer in the study of religion and atheism in Russia before and after the Soviet collapse. Her wide-ranging scholarship on Russian life and identity, including three monographs, has powerfully shaped how we think about and research religion and atheism across the geographic and temporal boundaries of Russian history. The organizers and participants of this discussion are especially grateful to Luehrmann for her contribution to this forum on Victoria Smolkin's book.

Introduction

For most students of Soviet history, religion and the state's attacks on it have traditionally attracted more attention than what was supposed to replace it, atheism. Why write about an idea that seemed so simple and empty, and not at all uniquely Soviet? Of much greater interest to historians have been the state's ruthless campaigns against established religions and popular religiosity, and the human carnage and material destruction such violence produced. When it came to religious belief, this was the history worth writing in order to better understand the broader Soviet transformation of people and their everyday lives, and the central role political violence played in eradicating traditional ways of life, particularly religion. What would fill the void—atheism—was assumed to be unproblematic, static, and ultimately a failure. Hardly a state secret, Soviet atheism could be researched in published sources and did not require archives.

One of the many joys of reading Victoria Smolkin's book is how she dismantles these assumptions in what the three reviewers—Courtney Doucette, Sonja Luehrmann, and Laurie Manchester—agree is a richly researched account of Soviet atheism that reveals its surprisingly complex history and shifting interactions with religious belief. Smolkin's keen eye for mapping the changes and continuities in this story provides readers early on with a clear framework covering the entire Soviet period. While the state's commitment to creating "a world without religion" (2) never wavered until close to the end of the USSR, the content and form of atheism, as well as the closely related methods for eradicating religion, changed remarkably over time. In seven well-crafted chapters, Smolkin shows how the Gordian knot binding religion and atheism evolved through three "oppositions"—the political, the ideological, and the spiritual—which roughly coincided with the rules of Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Leonid Brezhnev, respectively (5).

In each stage, Smolkin argues, the Soviet state perceived religion primarily through the lens of one of these oppositions and crafted strategies for its eradication and atheism's victory accordingly. So, whereas the Stalinist state saw established religion as a political threat to be crushed and then repurposed during the war, Khrushchev's regime perceived continuing religious belief as an ideological problem to be eradicated through education, science, and "cosmic enlightenment." Finally, under Brezhnev, the state's atheist warriors decided that the final battle with religion had to be fought on the spiritual front whereby atheism would at last displace religious beliefs with socialist rituals marking major life events (births, marriages, and death); with philosophical answers to life's big questions; and with the moral and social precepts for living a proper life.

As Courtney Doucette points out, Smolkin successfully traces this rich history of Soviet atheism primarily from the state's perspective, giving readers "a view of the Soviet state from within, that is, how the state understood itself." More specifically, according to Doucette, Smolkin has written "a history 'from the middle' in which the central characters are bureaucrats, researchers, and journal editors who embark on the mission of making the Soviet Union suspend its belief in god." Similarly, Laurie Manchester writes that "Smolkin is interested in the productive side of the atheism project, how it forced Communists to come up with an alternative cosmology." Their struggle to do so, Smolkin shows, made their ideological discussions quite dynamic, particularly in the Brezhnev years when conventional wisdom tells us that Marxism-Leninism had ossified. According to Sonja Luehrmann, Smolkin "argues that documents from inside the ideological apparatus paint a different picture: one of an ideology that was not stagnant, but developed in response to challenges, prominent among which were both the persistence of religious practices and widespread ideological indifference."

For each reviewer, Smolkin's book represents a critical intervention on major questions that go beyond the history of Soviet atheism. Speaking to the interests of this forum's audience, Luehrmann sees the book as a valuable contribution to broader, transnational histories of secularization that have traditionally ignored the Soviet case because of Cold War blinders. Luehrmann writes, "If Smolkin challenges Soviet historians to take atheism seriously, the challenge her book poses to scholars of nonreligion is to think of socialist state-sponsored atheism as part of the history of secularization."

Both Doucette and Manchester address Smolkin's insights on the role of atheism in the collapse of the Soviet party-state. As Manchester observes, "Smolkin does not provide one piece to that puzzle; she provides THE piece. For atheism's failure was intrinsically entwined with Communism's." Indeed, Smolkin shows how attaining Communism was predicated in Soviet ideology on the total eradication of religion and the creation of an atheist society. The book's provocative implication, therefore, is that the full rehabilitation of religion in 1988 and subsequent rapid evaporation of state-backed atheism effectively sealed the fate of the Soviet project. Doucette, however, remains skeptical: "here we should question whether atheism equals the whole Soviet project, and what part of the Soviet project we are seeing through the lens of atheism, for [Mikhail] Gorbachev certainly did not see himself breaking with that project." Yet, as our field's attention to explaining the Soviet collapse continues to grow, Smolkin's insights will be major ones to contend with.

In my own reading of *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty*, the author's account of the spiritual turn in Soviet atheism is the most fascinating. As the reviewers point out, it complicates our understanding of ideology in the Brezhnev years and calls for closer attention to the social scientific studies of lived religion that were conducted at the time. The rise of atheist rituals and spirituality—which Smolkin aptly calls the "socialist ritual complex" (181)—and the journal *Science and Religion* (*Nauka i religiia*) suggest that the borders between atheism, established religion, and popular religiosity were quite porous. As Smolkin shows, for example, the journal inadvertently became a chief source for knowledge about religious beliefs and practices (237-238). In short, if a reader could not attend church, *Nauka i religiia* served as a viable substitute for learning about religion and its rituals. Further research into the popular reception of this journal would be most welcome. But beyond the journal and the socialist rituals that advanced atheist spirituality in people's private lives, I would like to know where else Smolkin would have researchers look for traces and adaptations of the spiritual turn produced by the atheist establishment. While we often assume that certain Soviet cultural phenomena—such as the cults of the child martyr Pavlik Morozov or wartime youth martyrs like Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia—owed something to Orthodox tradition, I wonder how Smolkin's attention to the spiritual phase of Soviet atheism could complicate such assumptions and how we trace the religious origins of Soviet rituals.¹ In other words, did the spiritual turn in Soviet atheism provide a more immediate context from which Soviet citizens drew their understanding of spirituality and its practices, and from which the authors of official cults borrowed in writing the lives of Soviet heroes and heroines?

As with every ground-breaking study, more questions are raised for future research than can possibly be answered. For example, in calling for more attention to the visual and performative components of atheist propaganda, Luehrmann writes, "It is clear that atheist propagandists sometimes expressed envy of the presumed emotional appeal and intimate reach of religious rituals – the question is if they wanted Soviet rituals and didactic practices to have exactly the same effect." In addition, Smolkin focuses primarily on the atheist establishment's battle with the Orthodox Church. Yet both Doucette and Manchester wonder whether greater attention to non-Orthodox religions such as Islam and Judaism would reveal different aspects of Soviet atheism's story.

For Doucette, the light that Smolkin's book sheds on ideology's changing functions and forms invites a deeper examination into the roles that ordinary people outside the atheist establishment played in shaping it. Similarly, while Smolkin's discovery of Soviet social scientists' studies of religion and atheism reveal fascinating insights into citizens' religious

¹ Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 76-77; Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta, 2005), 16, 200, 229-230; Adrienne Harris, "Memorializations of a Martyr and Her Mutilated Bodies: Public Monuments to Soviet War Hero Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, 1942 to the Present," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 5:1 (2012): 73-90.

worldviews and popular practices, much remains to be done on the reception of atheist propaganda. On that score, Manchester suggests that scientific enlightenment campaigns fell on deaf ears among Orthodox believers because their religion was apophatic and thus made them theoretically immune to the potentially devastating revelations of science. I wonder, however, how aware ordinary believers were of such aspects of Orthodoxy, especially since, as Manchester later points out, there was such “paltry knowledge of religion among almost all Soviet citizens when the Soviet Union collapsed.” Yet, as Smolkin shows, popular knowledge and forms of religiosity from holy wells and unsanctioned baptisms to the ‘Stone Zoia’ phenomenon² only seemed to proliferate in late socialism to the great annoyance of both church and state. And, as noted above, Soviet citizens did have access to much information about religious beliefs and practices in the pages of *Nauka i religii*. The convoluted cosmologies of persons operating outside established religions—but perhaps also engaging and influencing atheist propaganda and rituals in their own right—suggest a fruitful area of research building upon Smolkin’s study.

One major topic of Smolkin’s book that none of the reviewers address is her insights on the ways that the battle between religion and atheism shifted from the political arena under Stalin to the domestic sphere and *byt* (everyday life) under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. As Smolkin shows, the emphasis on the domestic and the everyday had much deeper roots in Bolshevik obsessions about *byt*—ordinary people’s everyday life and the various rituals and values that constituted it—and the monumental difficulties of transforming it. “The final frontier in the party’s war against religion was *byt*,” Smolkin writes (36). Initially mapped out by such theorists as Leon Trotsky, the struggle against religion in the everyday (i.e., beyond institutions of established religion and instead in people’s homes, minds, and customs) waned under Stalin but was revived forcefully under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Religiosity—whether or not it was sanctioned by the Orthodox Church—increasingly shifted to the domestic sphere because of the state’s renewed closure of churches but also because of its mass housing campaign that unintentionally gave people the private space and time to practice religion. Under Brezhnev, as Smolkin then shows, efforts to infuse spirituality in Soviet atheism and construct socialist rituals were meant to penetrate the domestic sphere—the very walls of which the state had built!—and complete the war on traditional *byt* as had been theorized decades before.

For students of Soviet housing and domesticity, Smolkin’s findings on the intersection of Soviet atheism, religiosity, and *byt* reveal a little-understood aspect of the Soviet home that merits further study. To date, scholars have shown how mass housing and single-family apartments emerged under Khrushchev and Brezhnev as chief sites not only for resolving severe housing and consumer shortages but transforming everyday life, eradicating the petty bourgeois tastes of the Stalin era, and creating a scientifically managed space of cutting-edge technology for a rational consumer subject—the Soviet housewife—who was ready to battle her profligate American counterpart in the Cold War.³ Little attention has been paid in this literature, however, to Soviet citizens’ use of the home as a refuge for practicing religion or the state’s attempts to supplant such practices with atheist rituals. Smolkin’s book suggests a fruitful avenue of new research that would expand our understanding of *byt* in late socialism, while also providing a much-needed spatial dimension to studies of religion and popular religiosity in Soviet history, particularly in cities.

² In which “a Komsomol girl from Kuibyshev turned to stone after blasphemously dancing with an Orthodox icon” (58).

³ Susan Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 61:2 (2002): 211-52; Susan Reid, “The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40:2 (2005): 289-316; Mark Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Baltimore and Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins University Press and the Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013); Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

On this final note, I thank the reviewers for their insights and questions about Smolkin's book, which I trust will generate many spirited discussions here and elsewhere.

Participants:

Victoria Smolkin is associate professor of history and Russian, East European, and Eurasian studies at Wesleyan University. A scholar of Communism, the Cold War, and Russia and the former Soviet Union, her work focuses on the intersections of politics with religion and ideology, including atheism, secularism, and nationalism. Smolkin's book, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton University Press, 2018; in paperback 2019), was a finalist for the 2019 Wayne S. Vucinich Book Prize for the most important contribution to Russian, Eurasian, and East European studies in any discipline of the humanities or social sciences. A Russian translation is forthcoming from New Literary Observer in 2020. She is currently at work on two projects: "The Crusade against Godlessness: Religion, Communism, and the Cold War Order" and "The Wall of Memory: Life, Death, and the Impossibility of History."

Steven E. Harris is associate professor of history at the University of Mary Washington. His first book, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Johns Hopkins, 2013) examined Soviet citizens' move from communal apartments to single-family apartments in the Khrushchev era. His current book project, "Flying Aeroflot: A History of the Soviet Union in the Jet Age," explores mass air travel and aviation culture in late socialism.

Courtney Doucette is Assistant Professor of History at the State University of New York at Oswego. She is currently writing a history of letter writing and the effort to create the new Soviet person during Perestroika.

Sonja Luehrmann, who passed away in 2019, received her Ph.D. from the Program in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan in 2009. Drawing on ethnographic and archival methods, her research engaged questions of human transformability: how people live their lives through shifting socioeconomic and political conditions, and how various religious and secular institutions appeal to the human capacity to change habits and convictions, while attempting to steer it in particular directions. Geographically, she was particularly interested in multi-ethnic and multi-religious areas such as Russia's Volga region, where ideological transformations get bound up with changing perceptions of self and other. She published two books on Soviet atheism and its effects on post-Soviet religion and historical memory: *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Indiana, 2011) and *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (Oxford, 2015), and was the editor of *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice* (Bloomington, IN, University of Indiana Press, 2017).

Laurie Manchester is Associate Professor of History at Arizona State University. She is the author of *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia* (Northern Illinois University, 2008), the co-editor of *Вера и личность в меняющемся обществе: Автобиографика и православие в России конца XVII — начала XX века* [Faith and Selfhood in a Changing Society: Autobiography and Orthodoxy in Russia from the End of the 18th to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century] (2019), and is presently writing a monograph tentatively titled "From China to the U.S.S.R.: The Return of the "True" Russians."

REVIEW BY COURTNEY DOUCETTE, SUNY OSWEGO

Victoria Smolkin's *A Sacred Space is Never Empty* cuts a welcome new entry into the history of religion in the Soviet Union by turning to religion's opposite: atheism. Expertly researched, beautifully written, and wonderfully illustrated, this book offers the first comprehensive history of atheism from the start of the Soviet period to its end. Examining belief/disbelief from a new angle, Smolkin successfully shifts the conversation on religion in the Soviet Union. Rather than focusing on religious persecution—though also without dismissing it, showing the author's keen sensitivity and understanding of the stakes of her topic—she shifts the attention to the issues the Soviet state had with religion to begin with. In other words, she escapes the political forces that have long shaped the study of Soviet religion—a politics that have largely emanated from Cold-War America, where the USSR was depicted as a bastion of 'godless Communism,' and a politics that have perhaps unwittingly been reproduced in an increasingly religious post-Soviet Russia. This study also shifts the discussion by focusing not on the persecuted, or giving a history 'from below,' but rather offering one 'from above' that promises to leave us with a view of the Soviet state from within, that is, how the state understood itself. The exhaustive research of the institutes and individuals that made up what Smolkin calls the "atheist apparatus" (4) and "atheist establishment" (198) also conveys a history 'from the middle' in which the central characters are bureaucrats, researchers, and journal editors who embarked on the mission of making the Soviet Union suspend its belief in God.

Smolkin shows very well that atheism itself was not a stable, constant, singularly defined concept. Rather, how the atheist apparatus understood atheism changed over time, evolving partially in correspondence with how they understood religion and the problems posed by religion. As the Soviet Union developed, atheism morphed

"from the antireligious repression and 'militant' atheism of the early Soviet period, to Stalin's rapprochement with religion in 1943, to Nikita Khrushchev's remobilization of the campaign against religion and turn to 'scientific atheism,' to Leonid Brezhnev's retreat from fundamental ideological utopianism in the late Soviet period, to [Mikhail] Gorbachev's break with atheism and return of religion to public life in 1988" (3-4).

And just as atheism changed, so, too, did the targets of ardent atheists, moving in the early Soviet period from the outright religious, who were seen as political enemies, to those who had insufficiently transformed themselves and still embodied the leftovers of times past under Khrushchev, to the ideologically indifferent under Brezhnev. Even though this book is a history of atheism, as Smolkin points out, it is impossible not to attend to religion. In the image of atheism, we have a kind of mirror that reflects religion—especially Russian Orthodoxy—from the state's evolving relationship to it as a political enemy in the 1920s and early 1930s, to a leftover from the past under Khrushchev, to competition in shaping the human personality under Brezhnev, to apparently no threat at all under Gorbachev after 1988. In short, in the history of religion's opposite, we learn a great deal about the history of religion, too.

In terms of the architecture of the study, it is curious that atheism is constructed as the opposite of religion, but religion is equated with Russian Orthodoxy. Smolkin acknowledges the equation, arguing that

"When the party used 'religion' as a general term, it was often implicitly speaking about Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Orthodox Church. This was both because Orthodox Christianity was the majority confession, constituting about 70 percent of the population at the turn of the century, and because of the deep historic ties between the Orthodox Church and the Russian state" (17).

Yet in a multi-confessional state where religious policy was not only applied unevenly but also differed for different religious groups, seeing Russian Orthodoxy as atheism's opposite raises questions.¹ Namely, was atheism intended to replace *all*

¹ For example, see Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53:2 (Summer 1992): 414-452.

religions in the USSR? Is the history of atheism actually a story about the Orthodox heartland and the western edge of the Soviet Union? Were there places and parts of the population who were not intended to be atheist ‘converts’? In short, which religious groups were the objects of Soviet atheist policies? Furthermore, in the mirror of the history of atheism, can we also see the history of Judaism or Islam, or do we only see Russian Orthodoxy?

Aside from what the history of atheism teaches us about the religion, the history of atheism is important for what it reveals about the history of Soviet ideology, and in this way, Smolkin’s bold work will remain a force for scholars of late socialism to contend with. One of the book’s central contentions is “that ideology in general and atheism in particular mattered—even in the late Soviet period” (9). In particular, ideology mattered for the state and for the atheist establishment, both of which remained committed to producing the ideological bedrock on which the Soviet project stood. In some ways, this book reveals even more about the continuities in Soviet ideology than the author suggests. Not only did atheism remain a central part of the Soviet project, as is well demonstrated, but, it seems, the project of human transformation, of creating the new man, of forging a distinctly Soviet socialist subject—this, too, comes across in the history of atheism as a window into Soviet ideology broadly speaking. While ideology remained central for the state and for atheists, Smolkin points out, the broader Soviet population seemed to care less and less. In this way, she sees resonance between what is revealed by the history of atheism and what anthropologist Alexei Yurchak finds in his study of the motley assortment of late Soviet youths (163).² To the state and atheist apparatuses, Smolkin argues, ideology “mattered precisely *because* most Soviet people were indifferent to Soviet atheism as a worldview and Soviet communism as an ideology, presenting the party with a serious political dilemma” (9-10). Even while the point on ideology here is extremely important—that it mattered, even after Stalin’s death—the overall trajectory of Soviet history as one of increasing disparity between the state and the people, and increasing disenchantment of the people, up to the point that the Soviet project itself fell apart, falls in line with some of the most influential histories of late socialism.³

The arguments on ideology, especially in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, are so central to this monograph that they are worth exploring in greater depth. First, Smolkin’s arguments contain important insights. In terms of the Khrushchev era, Smolkin writes,

“The ideological transformations of the Khrushchev era, then, were not just about the content of ideology—about replacing Stalinism with a new Communist dogma—but also about form, reflecting a new conception of the work that ideology was supposed to do. No longer just a tool for policing orthodoxy, ideology was now envisioned as an instrument of spiritual transformation through which the real Soviet person of the present was supposed to become the model Communist person of the future” (108).

The distinction between the content and form of ideology is a promising one that draws attention to how the very purpose of ideology could change over the course of the Soviet period. In this way, ideology, much like ‘atheism’ and ‘religion,’ is not a monolithic concept but one that evolves over time. At the same time, what is here defined as the ‘form’ of ideology, “the spiritual transformation through which the real Soviet person of the present was supposed to become the model Communist person of the future,” raises a question. Had not human transformation been at the heart of the Soviet project from its inception? How was the Khrushchev era—or for that matter the Brezhnev era in what Smolkin expertly shows as the period of aiming to produce “the socialist way of life” (198)—different from the 1920s or 1930s?

Another questions that hangs over the discussion of ideology in the book is what exactly ideology is. It appears here to be a set of ideas that change in content and form over time but generally issue from the state or state-sponsored institutions. Here it might be useful to engage the broader theoretical discussion on ideology, particularly as it played out among

² Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

³ Yurchak’s *Everything was Forever, until it was No More* is a case in point.

historians of the 1920s and 1930s in the so-called Soviet subjectivities debate. One definition of ideology that might be usefully engaged or at least addressed here is that put forth by Jochen Hellbeck in his 2006 study of Soviet diaries.

“Rather than a given, fixed, and monologic textual corpus, in the sense of ‘Communist party ideology,’ he writes, “ideology may be better understood as a ferment working in individuals and producing a great deal of variation as it interacts with the subjective life of a particular person. The individual operates like a clearing house where ideology is unpacked and personalized, and in the process the individual remakes himself into a subject with distinct and meaningful biographical features. And in activating the individual, ideology itself comes to life.”⁴

In short, ideology does not issue from above, but is co-produced by the state and citizens. If ideology is taken in this sense, it is unclear how ideology could matter so much, especially to the state, but not to the broader population. The question is not only what ideology is, but also where it was? Also, in terms of a broader methodological question: can we understand ideology by only looking at the layers of state and the atheist apparatuses without looking at other levels of society?

The book’s history of Soviet atheism, religion, and ideology culminates in a plot twist so fabulous that it would be impossible to make up: Gorbachev’s meeting with Patriarch Pimen, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, on April 29, 1988, the Soviet leader’s blessing given to the thousandth anniversary of the Christianization of Rus’, and, on the heels of seventy-one years of attempts to forge a wholly atheist Soviet Union, a declaration that religious believers, too, could be fully fledged Soviet people. Smolkin draws out this stunning and bizarre historical moment in all due style and is right to pause on the question of what in the world caused Gorbachev’s change in course that was unanticipated not just by those in the Cold-War West but even to his immediate colleagues in the Communist Party. Smolkin emphasizes that it is essential “to place Gorbachev’s reversal on the religious question in its immediate political context” (234). The particular political circumstances she points to are the increasing difficulties to Perestroika signaled by Nina Andreeva’s March 1988 letter in *Soviet Russia*—a conservative response to reform that complained that Stalin’s achievements had become overlooked—and the broader conservative backlash to reform that it indicated, as well as the upcoming visit of President Ronald Reagan, who had dubbed the USSR the ‘evil empire,’ and who would also meet with Patriarch Pimen during his visit. Politically speaking, Gorbachev could not afford to forego a meeting with the head of the Orthodox Church, though this does not exactly explain why the Soviet leader went so far as to restore certain church properties.

I would offer a somewhat different interpretation of why Gorbachev made this seemingly erratic shift in course. Much like Smolkin, I would start by emphasizing that Perestroika was not a departure from socialism but an attempt to rejuvenate it. I agree, too, that the architects of reform were responding to the problem that the atheist establishment knew had become rampant under Brezhnev: popular indifference to ideology. More than this, I would add that Perestroika was about *moral* rejuvenation. At the heart of the reform program as Soviet leaders articulated it from 1985 was an effort to recapture the momentum of the Soviet humanist project, the human transformational project of turning Soviet subjects into activated Soviet citizens. Hence the effective rewriting of the “Moral Code of the Builders of Communism” into a new set of guidelines for Soviet socialist morality in the new Party Program issued in 1985/1986.⁵ The state’s call for moral rejuvenation coincided with a popular explosion in moral discourse captured by the hundreds of thousands of entranced audience members of the television hypnotist Anatoly Kashpirovsky, the tsunami of Orthodox conversions, and the mountains of religious and mystical *samizdat* publications—all of which is important context for the millennial celebration

⁴ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12-13.

⁵ Courtney Doucette, “Perestroika: The Last Attempt to Create the New Soviet Person,” Ph.D. diss. (Rutgers University, 2017), 37-38.

of the conversion of Rus'.⁶ This might have been included in the final chapter to give a taste of the spiritual revolutionary ethos of Perestroika.

Why did the broader spiritual boom matter to Gorbachev's meeting with Patriarch Pimen? The answer might go back to Gorbachev's original diagnosis of the problem with Soviet society that necessitated Perestroika in the first place. Part of the problem with an enervated, disinterested, disbelieving population, reformers thought, was that Soviet people felt themselves estranged from the state. They did not feel that they had a seat at the table of government, that they were co-producers of ideology. Gorbachev wanted to invite them back to the table, hence the many calls for public letters, for discussions in the press, for the production and publication of a wider variety of cultural works (many of which, incidentally, engaged the theme of moral rejuvenation), and democratic voting procedures that came after robust election campaigns. To have citizens become co-producers of the ideology that would define Perestroika, Gorbachev could not simply issue a moral agenda from above (whether or not it involved the Patriarch). He had to give even the convulsing, converting, hypnotized people a place at the table. In short, the meeting with Patriarch Pimen might not have been a purely politically motivated move. It fit seamlessly into the bigger project of Perestroika. The meeting and all that followed it *did* signal a reversal on atheist policy, but here we should question whether atheism equals the whole Soviet project, and what part of the Soviet project we are seeing through the lens of atheism, for Gorbachev did not see himself breaking with that project, but as responding to the times.

In discussing how the Soviet state attempted to fill the sacred space that the eradication of religion left open, Smolkin's book fills a considerable gap in the historiography of both religion/atheism and the late Soviet period. This model work of research and writing is certain to leave a significant mark on the field.

⁶ Moral language populated all parts of Gorbachev-era discourse. For an examination of morality and emerging Soviet liberals, see Guillaume Sauvé, *Subir la Victoire: Essor et chute de l'intelligentsia libérale en Russie (1987-1993)* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2019).

REVIEW BY SONJA LUEHRMANN, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Victoria Smolkin has written the most comprehensive history of Soviet atheism to date, spanning the full length of Soviet history and drawing on sources from state and party archives, Soviet academic studies, and oral history interviews. What is more important, her narrative takes atheism seriously as a part of the Soviet ideological project, a project she defines alternately as a struggle for a “monopoly on political, ideological, and spiritual authority” (4) and as an attempt to “reach the Soviet soul” (105). Smolkin’s approach to atheism as a political ideology sets her work apart both within Soviet history and within wider histories and sociologies of unbelief.

In the field of Soviet history, atheism rarely receives attention as a current of thought in itself. Promoting godlessness is either seen as a rather perfunctory aspect of putting Marxism into practice, or purely from the perspective of the effects that anti-religious campaigns had on religious institutions. Even among those who have studied the history of anti-religious campaigns, there is a relative consensus that atheism meant most to those who had to promote it as part of their job description, such as the members of the League of the Militant Godless and Party secretaries charged with anti-religious work.¹ By focusing on the post-war Soviet Union, when religious competitors were no longer a direct threat and promoting a ‘scientific world view’ was the order of the day, Smolkin shifts our attention to the increasingly varied practices internal to the atheist project. Here, religion continued to serve as internal other, a foil against which the successes and failures of secular ideology were measured.²

What is unusual about this approach is that it takes the thoughts, doubts, and discussions of atheist scholars and bureaucrats almost at face value. Acknowledging that by the Brezhnev era, “most Soviet people no longer took [ideology] seriously” (10), she argues that documents from inside the ideological apparatus paint a different picture: one of an ideology that was not stagnant, but developed in response to challenges, prominent among which were both the persistence of religious practices and widespread ideological indifference.

To combat both, the science-popularizing Knowledge Society (*Obshchestvo Znaniye*) set up a network of planetariums, published a magazine that juxtaposed scientific and religious ideas, and conducted formal lectures and informal question-and-answer sessions and conversations. Most of all, *Znaniye* and other centrally located organizations, such as the Institute of Scientific Atheism within the Central Committee’s Academy of Social Sciences, brought together atheist lecturers, philosophers and other scholars to discuss the effects of their work. In interpreting transcripts of such meetings, Smolkin picks up on a certain sense of envy. Worried about how to reach the hearts and minds of Soviet citizens, atheists often concluded that religious organizations do that better, appealing to emotions as well as intellect, and to offer a comprehensive framework for giving meaning to life events. By promoting solemn secular rituals such as marriage registration in wedding palaces and secular funerals, Smolkin argues, late Soviet atheism pushed the Soviet state to become “a church” (179, 193).

This narrative is compelling, and it allows Smolkin to lay out atheist descriptions of religious and secular rituals in fascinating detail. However, I wonder how the analysis would change if Smolkin followed the example of other recent students of Soviet ideologies, who often shift attention from the language of ideological argumentation to the aesthetic performances through which ideology became part of Soviet life. In his study of the aesthetic forms of Soviet festivals, historian Malte Rolf notes early Soviet attempts to contrast the reason and “sobriety” of socialist festivals to the “collective

¹ William Husband, *Godless Communists: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

² For another recent study that takes focuses on science popularizing as key to the ways socialist governments in post-war Europe sought to bring about social transformations, see Paul Betts and Stephen Smith, eds., *Science, Religion, and Communism in Cold War Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

intoxication” involved in many manifestations of folk religiosity.³ In ethnographer Caroline Humphrey’s apt observation (based on her visit to a collective farm in the Buryat Autonomous Republic in the 1960s), this meant that socialist ceremonies ended up taking on the form of an official meeting “almost as though people can think of no other ‘Soviet’ way of doing things.”⁴

As the wonderful illustrations of *A Sacred Space is Never Empty* show, Soviet atheism also had a rich visual culture. Valerie Kivelson, Joan Neuberger and others who have worked on the power of Soviet images have argued that this visual culture was also built on a discourse of envy, aiming to replace Orthodox icons and other religious images in their ubiquitous presence and presumed emotional appeal.⁵ However, with their openly didactic messages and modernist aesthetics, few atheist posters would have served as a direct replacement for icons. Rather, they demand a different kind of bodily orientation – largely limited to visual apprehension, rather than the tactile interactions that were part of the encounters with religious images in Orthodox Russia. When looking at the practices through which atheists tried to transmit their convictions (often creatively misunderstanding religion in the process), they look less eager to simply replace religious traditions. Rather, the ideal participant of atheist rituals had a new way of being in the world, one that their organizers saw as more individualized, rational, and less dependent on the past, closer perhaps to what Charles Taylor describes as “the buffered self.”⁶ Put somewhat differently, it is clear that atheist propagandists sometimes expressed envy of the presumed emotional appeal and intimate reach of religious rituals – the question is if they wanted Soviet rituals and didactic practices to have exactly the same effect.

If Smolkin challenges Soviet historians to take atheism seriously, the challenge her book poses to scholars of nonreligion is to think of socialist state-sponsored atheism as part of the history of secularization. Perhaps as a reaction to Cold War images of the secular Soviet Union as an ‘empire of evil,’ sociologists and historians who work on the development of secular and non-religious ideas in the West often hesitate to make connections with atheist histories behind the Iron Curtain. For this conversation, Smolkin’s close reading of Soviet sociologies of religion and atheism offers much food for thought. Not unlike some western historians of secularization, Soviet scholars identified women and successive elderly generations as groups whose loyalty or disaffection could make or break the fate of a religious organization in modernizing society.⁷ Earlier than their western colleagues, Soviet sociologists pinpointed indifference to questions of religion and irreligion as a special problem whose causes and consequences deserved special study.

Soviet sociologists saw religious indifference among youth as a problem starting in the 1960s, because it signaled a general “opting out” of official Soviet culture in favor of various countercultures” (160), and an unwillingness to defend the advances of socialist construction. On the other hand, one might argue that it demonstrates some of the success of Soviet secularization: by the 1960s, it became difficult to communicate a need to struggle against religious institutions that had, at best, a very marginal presence in lives and cityscapes. I wonder how this phenomenon would compare to the current interest in “religious nones” and the question of second- and third-generation atheists in Northern Europe and some parts of North

³ Malte Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006), p. 243.

⁴ Caroline Humphrey, *Marx Went Away but Karl Stayed Behind* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 399.

⁵ Valerie Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, “Seeing into Being: An Introduction,” in *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture*, eds. Valerie Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 1-11.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁷ Callum Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, the UK and USA since the 1960s* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012).

America.⁸ How would we study indifference in societies where ideological mobilization is not the norm? What can we learn from Soviet scholars who noticed normalized nonreligion? Smolkin suggests that Soviet atheist scholars are not always perfect guides, because “their two roles – atheist activist and social scientist” often came into conflict (161). However, her serious reading of their attempts to define the contents of a secular society while analyzing the causes of religious persistence also bridges histories of secularization on both sides of the Iron Curtain. On both sides, urbanization, nuclear family housing, and female employment may have had more impact on secularization than any conscious promotion of pro- or anti-religious views. By taking Soviet atheism seriously, Smolkin also challenges us to stop relegating it to histories of ideology that are separate from the social processes of secularization.

⁸ Phil Zuckerman, *Society without God: What the least religious nations can tell us about contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Johannes Quack and Cora Schuh, eds., *Religious Indifference: New Perspectives from the Studies on Secularization and Nonreligion* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2017).

REVIEW BY LAURIE MANCHESTER, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Bourgeois atheism, the absence of belief in religion, may be a straightforward concept, but Soviet atheism was an entirely more complicated beast. Victoria Smolkin's *A Sacred Space is Never Empty* explores how the meaning and implementation of atheism was debated and redefined over the course of the entire history of the Soviet Union. Being good Marxists, Soviet Communists understood that religion was antithetical to Communism. They had been taught by Marx that once the material conditions for religion had been eradicated, religion would wither away. But once the Soviet Union was modernized, and the bulk of its population was comprised of educated urban workers or intelligentsia members, religious believers remained and new believers converted. In the post-Stalinist period atheism was no longer simply the extinction of religion. It was an ideology that had to fill the role religion had played. It needed to provide people's lives with meaning, to follow them from cradle to grave, to engage their emotions, and to comfort them. Smolkin is interested in the productive side of the atheism project, or how it forced Communists to come up with an alternative cosmology. In attempting to define atheism, a feat party members and social scientists never agreed upon, they had to define Communism. Just as monographs on pre-revolutionary Russian history were once obligated to illuminate the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Smolkin does not provide just one piece to that puzzle; she provides *the* piece. For atheism's failure was intrinsically entwined with that of Communism.

Arranged chronologically, the monograph begins with the physical attack on religion as counter-revolutionary in the early Soviet period and ends with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's acceptance of religion as part of Soviet life. Smolkin explains how during World War II and the difficult immediate post-war years, atheist work ceased, as Joseph Stalin mobilized and coopted religion, in particular the Russian Orthodox Church, into becoming a submissive partner of the Soviet state. Nikita Khrushchev, who was committed to reaching full Communism within his reign, returned to atheist work, even reviving the destruction and closure of churches. But as Smolkin uncovers in chapter two, the Party quickly became aware that these attacks on religion were backfiring; the number of religious rites being performed actually increased because believers feared that all churches would soon be closed. The deeper the new cadres of social scientists who were devoted to atheism dug, the more troubled they became: some local party members were believers, and many believers did not see a contradiction between believing in the two opposing ideologies (68, 83).

Perplexed, they found that Soviet citizens were using the new leisure time they had in the relatively more materially comfortable post-Stalinist period to search for meaning to their lives, and that search was sometimes leading them to religion (Smolkin, 107). As Smolkin explains in chapter three, atheist cadres initially attempted to employ science to compete with religion. They were convinced that belief in religion and science could not co-exist. A million lectures were given, traveling planetariums were taken to collective farms and cosmonauts were enlisted to explain that their failure to meet God in space meant that God did not exist (87-99). Yet it turned out that religion was much more sophisticated and flexible than Soviet social scientists had thought. Most believers had no difficulty continuing to believe in their faith even after humans began flying around outer space, just as some believers reconciled their faith with Communist ideology. Smolkin goes on in chapter four to discuss how atheism was then reconfigured as morality by the Soviet state (105). But the media, which had played a key role in earlier campaigns, was increasingly difficult to enlist; by the 1970s the creative intelligentsia itself was often drawn to the spirituality that atheism had tried, but could not, fulfill (186, 191-192). Toward the end of Communism, social scientists discovered another unsettling finding: many Soviet youths were indifferent toward *any* ideology (211). Hence the collapse of Communism.

Smolkin's exhaustive research for this book included work in sixteen archives in three post-Soviet countries. Among the many gems she discovered are the field notes of interviews with believers that were undertaken by social scientists, letters believers wrote to the party, and debates among party members behind closed doors. She also found fascinating discussions in the Soviet press. Party members criticized themselves throughout the Soviet period regarding their failure to achieve whatever they believed atheism was; *A Sacred Space is Never Empty* illustrates just how hard they tried right up until the end.

Besides approaching ideological belief in the Soviet Union from an entirely new direction, this monograph fills several holes in the historiography. Atheist campaigns have mainly been studied in the Soviet Union only for the 1920s and the early 1930s, and little scholarly work has been devoted to ideology in the post-Stalinist period.¹ Smolkin reveals how ideology mattered, and was being negotiated, even during the ‘stagnant’ Leonid Brezhnev period, which most scholars have assumed was devoid of any ideological innovation.

While this beautifully written book contributes to themes far beyond Soviet historiography, such as why religion continues to thrive in some modern societies, Smolkin does not fully analyze some of the important implications of her research for our understanding of the Soviet Union, the relationship between religion and Communism, and the relationship between elites and common people. The recognition by the Party and social scientists in the 1960s that they didn’t know how to reach the “barely literate masses” (135) is mentioned, for example, but not elaborated on. The disdain of the party and some of the Soviet intelligentsia for the masses dates far back into the pre-revolutionary period, and helps explain how specifically in the Russian context, marred by a deep gulf between the haves and the have-nots, Communism failed. Yet the enlightenment project that many Russian intellectuals drew upon to transform peasants into rational beings had been initiated by the eighteenth-century French philosophes and was encoded in Liberalism worldwide, providing a global context for Communism’s failure since these non-Russian intellectuals have also regarded the masses with suspicion.

Like many books written by historians of the Soviet period, this monograph offers some questionable arguments on other aspects of the pre-revolutionary background period. Smolkin begins the book with a summary of the role of religion in pre-revolutionary Russia that recycles outdated stereotypes about the Orthodox Church. She grounds her contention about the harmonious union between the Imperial State and the Church in the 988 conversion of the peoples of Rus’ to Orthodoxy that was initiated by Grand Prince Vladimir. This act occurred nearly a millennium before the Soviet period, and centuries before Imperial Russia came into existence. The relationship between the Imperial State and the Church was actually rockier than she depicts. The book does not mention, for example, the Church’s objections to the abolishment of the patriarchy by Peter the Great in 1721, a loss it immediately rectified as soon as the Romanov dynasty fell in 1917. Smolkin’s description of Orthodoxy as a political ideology rather than a belief system, and her statement that pre-revolutionary Orthodoxy was more about experience than belief, do not take into account the many studies about the richness of late Imperial lived Orthodoxy.² If belief did not matter, why did so many believers take it entirely upon themselves to retain their parishes until most were forcibly closed in the 1930s, and why did they later cling to this religion despite the risks? The institutional structure of the Church in the Imperial period, whereby the Church was an organ of the state headed by the Tsar, was of little concern to individual believers, particularly the rural masses. Only a handful ever encountered a bishop. Their complaints about their parish priests focused mainly on having to pay them for religious rites, which priests were forced to require in lieu of financial support from the State, not on priests being forced to read imperial proclamations. The fact that only a handful of priests ever violated the act of confession, which they were required by the state to do after 1721, further lessened the tie between the state and the parish clergy in the eyes of most believers.

A deeper understanding of Orthodoxy would also have provided deeper insight into why Soviet atheists’ attempt to debunk religion with science and space travel utterly failed. Eastern Christianity adheres to apophatic, or negative theology. Unlike Western Christians, who spilled much ink trying to prove what God was, Eastern Christians never attempted to prove or disprove God’s existence. Instead they focused on what God was not. Church publicists at the turn of the twentieth

¹ For studies on atheist campaigns in the early Soviet period see Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1997); Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); William Husband, *Godless Communists: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999).

² For a few examples of such recent works on lay piety in Late Imperial Russia see Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of the Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Nadieszda Kizenko, *A Prodigal Saint: Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian People* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2000); Robert H. Greene, *Bodies like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

century responded to the specific challenges that science could pose to their faith by explaining that Eastern Christians' faith was not threatened by science. According to this interpretation, reason ruled the temporal world, while faith ruled the heavenly world. Believers strove toward salvation so that they might live well beyond the grave; they engaged in scholarship, including science, so that they might have a good life on earth.

Yet Orthodoxy was only one of the many religions practiced in the Soviet Union. Smolkin addresses her almost exclusive focus on Orthodoxy in the introduction by stating that 70% of believers in the Soviet period were Orthodox and that when the Communist Party discussed religion they implicitly were concerned only with Orthodoxy (17). Yet we know there were different policies toward other religions in the U.S.S.R. until Stalinism, and there have been several recent studies of treatment of other faiths.³ Clearly the party desired all Soviet citizens to be atheists, regardless of religion. Orthodoxy, because it was the largest faith and the official Imperial state religion until 1905, was deemed the most counter-revolutionary before World War Two and thus anti-religious policies were concerned with it. Yet after the war numerous other faiths were associated with foreign enemies, and Orthodoxy was once again rendered an organ of the state. Were social scientists studying atheism in the Central Asian republics also concerned mainly with Orthodoxy? Perhaps more explanation would suffice to clarify these issues, or perhaps the monograph should have focused only on the Russian republic of the Soviet Union.

Although Smolkin mentions the violence against the Church in the 1930s as well as the 1958 law which hindered participation in Orthodox rites, she downplays the role of force in battling religion after Stalin's death. Her argument would have been strengthened by an emphasis on the fact that few Orthodox churches functioned in the post-Stalinist provinces (often there was only one working church in each provincial capital) and that young people who attended church as late as the mid-1980s risked their careers. The fact that religion persisted in some circles even under continued distress renders the failure of atheism more astounding. She notes that in the early 1960s, the number of Church rituals performed decreased, but after the bulldozing of many churches during Khrushchev's attack on Orthodoxy, how many fewer churches were open? How many priests were serving after Khrushchev limited the number of ordinations and numerous priests were jailed on trumped up charges? The passing comments about Stalinism as practical rather than ideological are in need of nuance. Was it not in the 1930s that Communism functioned most like the belief system the atheism project later sought to create?

Smolkin does not really take a stand on the most important issue her book raises: did Communism essentially function as a religion during the Soviet period? She concludes the introduction by stating: "This book, then, is about how the party discovered that it had to become a church and the revolutionary attempt to turn an ideology into a religion" (19), and sums up some of the historiography on communism and religion after stating that "ideologies have long been compared to religion" (6). Yet the book focuses on Cold War studies of Communism and Nazism as political religions, rather than engaging recent monographs that provide detailed studies on Bolshevism as a faith in the 1920s and 30s.⁴ Many scholars have argued that the alternative cosmology, including the new Soviet person, was formed in the 1930s.⁵ That this model did not appeal to all Soviet citizens, and was itself in flux over the following decades, appears to be what the post-Stalinist atheist

³ See Emily Baran, *Dissent on the Margins: How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Heather Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 127-220; Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport: Praeger, 2001); Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 112-144; Robert Weinberg, "Demonizing Judaism in the Soviet Union during the 1920s," *Slavic Review* 67 (Spring, 2008), 1:120-153.

⁴ See most prominently Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press, 2000).

⁵ See most effectively Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

project was about. As the book is the first to focus on atheism in the post-Stalinist period, it could easily have challenged the most provocative and recent study, which argues that Bolshevism only functioned as a faith for one generation.⁶

Tackling this issue, however, requires a definition of religion. Drawing on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, Smolkin argues that there is no universal definition since religion is defined by history and by those who use it, often for political purposes. At one point she does sum up some of the existing definitions of religion: “a belief in the supernatural, a force that binds and integrates communities, or a disciplinary instrument,” and states that these definitions of religion are significant for understanding Soviet atheism (4). Elaborating on Emile Durkheim’s broad definition of religion as beliefs which fulfill certain social functions, and which includes atheism as a religion, would have helped the author to explain this connection.⁷ Smolkin appears to adopt her subjects’ definition (that of Soviet social scientists), which she traces back to Vladimir Lenin’s insistence that Communism was not a religion, that religion was the opposite of Communism, a threat to Communist authority, and a tie to the world the Bolsheviks were overthrowing. She argues that the policy of Soviet Communists on atheism was not consistent, but that their policy on religion was. But the book uncovers how both policies fluctuated, and how both policies were intertwined, undermining the claim that the book is about atheism, not religion.

However one defines religion, it, and not just the policies towards it, also changed over the course of the Soviet period. Since violence, at least regarding religion, was still part of the post-Stalinist repertoire, the Soviet state could have revitalized Stalin’s pre-war dream of arresting every clergyman and closing every church. The shift Smolkin has found in anti-religious activism from political to ideological (111) signaled a desire on the part of the state to win over the hearts and minds of its citizens without force, a process some scholars have identified as one that was more invasive than the mass violence of the 1930s.⁸ But social scientists were not the only representatives of the state to combating religion after Stalin’s death: the KGB, the NKVD’s successor, remained active, not just combating religion, but controlling the Orthodox Church. Winning over hearts and minds is productive, but so is altering the ideology of some of a state’s citizens, especially since that ideology can be used in foreign relations campaigns, as Orthodoxy was as early as 1927. If the Orthodox Church was corrupted by the state before 1917, what about the Orthodox Church in the post-war period, when almost every priest had to report to the KGB on a regular basis? Smolkin mentions that by institutionalizing religion the state can control it. She also, in passing, explains how both the Church and state fought some of the same enemies, such as superstition and sectarianism. I agree with her that there is a difference between trying to eradicate religion and creating an atheist state, and her book is fascinating precisely because it focuses on the latter. But when Smolkin refers to the ideological wars that occurred in the post-Stalinist years, I do not see the Church as an opponent left to battle the state’s ideology. At one point she states that it was hard for the Communist Party to compete with the Church as the latter was centuries old. But is a cultural artifact capable of engaging in an ideological war? One could argue that the paltry knowledge of religion among almost all Soviet citizens when the Soviet Union collapsed is in fact the best indicator of how successful the Soviet Union was both at eradicating religion, and creating an atheist ideology, as evidenced by the intense revival of religions rushing to fill the void left after belief in Communism dissipated?

Perhaps her most tantalizing finding that Smolkin does not fully analyze is that for some Communists and believers there was no contradiction between being a Communist *and* a believer. Numerous educated Soviet citizens in the 1960s also found many similarities between Communism and Christianity, viewing Communist ethics as secularized Christian morals.

⁶ Slezkine.

⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim famously argued that as long as atheism binds people together into a moral community, it is a religion. For other prominent sociologists of religion who argued that atheism was a religion see Thomas Luckmann’s *Invisible Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967) and Ninian Smart’s *The World’s Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁸ See Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 279-328.

The Soviet atheist project attempted to collapse private and public life, empowering teachers as much as parents and sending activists into the home, just as Orthodoxy traditionally did. What does the fact that one could be religious and a Communist tell us? That Communism never won over people's hearts and minds? But then why did so many consider themselves Communists, albeit while observing some religious rites? Was it not that they complemented each other, providing together a complete cosmology? This seems to be the conclusion that Gorbachev reached in 1988. After reading this book this reader concludes that the Party filled the empty space it created. But it was rejected by believers, left others indifferent, and for some Soviet citizens religion and communism could co-exist alongside one another.

RESPONSE BY VICTORIA SMOLKIN, WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Books, I am learning, cast long shadows. They continue to haunt us with unanswered questions, and I am grateful for this opportunity to return to and think through these questions. I am especially to those who made this opportunity possible: Cindy Ewing, who organized this roundtable, and Diane Labrosse, who joined her in patiently guiding this roundtable to completion; and my esteemed and generous colleagues: Steve Harris, who wrote the introduction; and Courtney Doucette, the late Sonja Luehrmann, and Laurie Manchester, who provided stimulating, perceptive, and challenging reviews. I hope that my response offers some new insights into the issues raised in and by *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty*.

The three reviews address the book's central definitions and arguments. Doucette examines the relationship between Soviet atheism and Communist ideology, asking what atheism can tell us about the significance of ideology for the Soviet project, and especially for its decline and dissolution. Manchester takes up the relationship between Soviet atheism and religion, both in a historical and historiographical sense, and invites a deeper reflection on one of Soviet history's so-called "cursed questions": whether "Communism essentially function[ed] as a religion during the Soviet period." Luehrmann, meanwhile, brings the book into conversation with fields beyond Russian and Soviet history, including religious and secular studies, pointing to how the Soviet case might shed new light on old debates about the relationship of religion, secularization, and modernity. Taken together, these engaged, and engaging, reviews ask what the book tells us about how Soviet atheism worked as ideology, religion, form of secularism, and agent of secularization.

Before turning to the specific questions posed by the reviewers and fleshing out what the book is about, it may be worthwhile to underscore what the book is *not* about.

First, the book is not about religion in a direct sense. That is to say, much of what the reader learns about religion in the USSR is refracted through the state, and, more specifically, through its ideological establishment.¹ My aim was not to say something about religious life in the Soviet Union as such, but about how the state understood and measured religion. This kind of investigation cannot really tell us much about how religious institutions, believers, and ways of life were transformed by the Soviet experience (although I hope it can help shed *some* light on these questions), but it *can* tell us about how the Soviet project understood its own purpose, progress, and power, as well as how it weighed the threat that religion—as institution, ideology, and way of life—posed to the Soviet project in different periods, places, and contexts.

Second, and perhaps more surprisingly, the book is also not about atheism in a direct sense either—at least not about atheism as a philosophical or theological proposition.² Inasmuch as it *is* about atheism, it is about atheism as an ideological

¹ In using the term "ideological establishment," I follow the historian David Brandenberger, perhaps the most devoted historian of Soviet ideology, who defines it as "an aggregate term for a variety of official circles associated with the production and dissemination of regime propaganda and the official ideological line." See David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7. I would also like to draw attention here to Sonja Luehrmann's important book, *Religion in Secular Archives*, which directly addresses what reading religion through the state both precludes, but also what it makes possible. See Sonja Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also my review of the book Luehrmann's *Religion in Secular Archives* in *Russian Review* 75:4 (October 2016): 731-733.

² For a recent work that takes up atheism from these perspectives, see John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

project, and about that project's *political* consequences.³ The book, then, is a history of atheism as an ideology in the service of politics, and as such, it inherently foregrounds certain perspectives: of the state, party, ideological establishment, and, most prominently, the segment of the ideological establishment that was concerned with atheist work: the *atheist apparatus*. The atheist apparatus had two goals: to transform Soviet society into a “society free of religion,” and to transform Soviet people into convinced atheists.⁴ The story I chronicle in the book is how, through their engagement with religious life on the ground, Soviet atheists came to see their goal of a society free of religion as insufficient; how they redefined their goal into a positive program of inculcating atheist conviction; and, finally, how their understanding of the mission and the stakes of their project changed in response to atheism's successes and failures. In retrospect, in what ways the book is about religion and atheism, and in what ways it *is not*, is something that could have been more explicit.

One way to clarify the infrastructure of the book and its argument is to look at the institution at the center of the story, the Institute of Scientific Atheism. The Institute shows how atheism was embedded in the Soviet project in two important ways: first, in its ideological establishment, and second, in its system of knowledge production. Founded in 1964 by party decree, the Institute of Scientific Atheism was established inside the Academy of Social Sciences, the institution that managed Soviet ideological production, which in turn was under the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee,⁵ which dictated its mission and curated its activity.⁶ We can look at the atheist apparatus, then, as being inside a nesting doll of

³ On a side note, when I began this project, I did not set out to write a political story; rather, my initial interest was in the problem of rituals, and in particular on how the Communist project addressed life-cycle rites around birth, marriage, and death, which are so central to religious life—which, in the final draft, ended up being only one chapter of the book.

⁴ The phrase “a society free of religion” was commonly used by the ideological establishment in articulating the goal of atheist work, and served as the title of the most comprehensive Soviet study of secularization conducted in the Soviet period, published as *Toward a Society Free of Religion: The Process of Secularization in the Conditions of Socialist Society*. See Pavel Kurochkin, ed. *K obshchestvu, svobodnomu ot religii: Protsess sekularizatsii v usloviakh sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva* (Moscow: Mysl', 1970). I discuss this study in Chapter 5 of the book.

⁵ It is important to note that the Academy of Social Sciences is distinct from the Academy of Sciences, which was not directly linked to the party apparatus. Besides the program at the Institute of Scientific Atheism, graduate students enrolling in the Academy of Social Sciences could specialize in: the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; economics (with sub-specializations in political economy, industrial economy, agrarian economy, and world economy); Philosophy (with sub-specializations in dialectical and historical materialism and the criticism of bourgeois philosophy and sociology); scientific communism; Soviet history; the history of international communist, labor, and national liberation movements; and literature, art, and journalism. Notably, there is very little academic work on the institutions that constitute the Soviet ideological establishment, especially in the postwar period. For instance, there are no studies of the Academy of Social Sciences or the Higher Party School. Some excellent studies of ideological production in the USSR include Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*; Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia Partia: Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR. 1953-1985 gg.* [The Russian Party: The Russian Nationalist Movement in the USSR, 1953-1985] (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2003) and Nikolai Mitrokhin, “Back-office Mikhaila Suslova, ili kem i kak proizvodilas' ideologiia Brezhnevskogo vremeni” [Mikhail Suslov's Back-Office, or, how and who produced Brezhnev era ideology], *Cahiers du monde russe* 54:3 (2013): 409-440. 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). See also Caroline Humphrey, “The ‘Creative Bureaucrat’: Conflicts in the Production of Soviet Communist Party Discourse,” *Inner Asia* 10:1 (2008): 5-35.

⁶ Alongside the party, the activities of the institutions that formed the ideological establishment were also curated by the security apparatus. For example, in an article in the internal KGB journal, titled “The Press is a sharp weapon in the prophylactic work of the KGB organs,” the authors noted that just in the year 1959, central and local newspapers – arguably the most obvious and widespread medium through which the ideological establishment engaged with Soviet society – “published almost 5000 articles on the reactionary and hostile activities of clerics and sectarians, based on KGB materials.” See G. Ermolenko, A. Trubitsyn, “The Press is a sharp weapon in

political and ideological institutions: the first doll was the Party Central Committee; next, within it, there was the ideological establishment; and within the ideological establishment, there was the atheist apparatus, the Institute of Scientific Atheism. Within the institute there were further, smaller, nesting dolls—regional branches across the USSR, and filial branches in three titular republics (Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Lithuania)—and these local units gathered data on the ground. This data then made its way back up through the chain of larger units, analyzed and synthesized along the way, until it ended up as a report to the Central Committee. Taken together, the atheist apparatus constituted a vast network of knowledge production about religion and atheism, which brought together higher education, technocratic expertise, and propaganda practitioners. The mission of the atheist apparatus was to create and disseminate a Soviet atheism that was endowed with political purpose, grounded in the social scientific theory, and practical and compelling enough to become part of the Soviet social fabric. To accomplish its mission, it produced a significant amount of expertise and knowledge about religion in the USSR, as I hope the book shows. But this should not obscure the fact that ultimately, all of the theoretical and practical expertise it produced was in the service of the Soviet Communist Party’s project: the consolidation of its political, ideological, and spiritual authority in Soviet society. When, during *perestroika*, the party came to see Soviet atheism as an obstacle rather than an aid in this project, atheism was discarded. This is why for me, in the end, the history of Soviet atheism is a story about politics.

On Ideology

To understand the politics, however, we need to understand the role of ideology, and I deeply appreciate the fact that all three reviewers draw attention to the centrality of ideology in the book. Luehrmann underscores that what sets the book apart is that it “takes atheism seriously as part of the Soviet ideological project,” and Manchester notes the distinct emphasis on “the productive side of the atheist project,” rather than just its destructive (anti-religious) side. Moreover, all three reviewers also note the book’s emphasis on the continued relevance of ideology to the Soviet project beyond the Stalin era.⁷ As Luehrmann writes, even during the so-called era of stagnation in the late Soviet period, ideology remained engaged with the challenges facing the project (such as the persistence of religiosity and the growth of societal indifference). Manchester notes that whereas most scholars assumed the late Soviet period was “devoid of any ideological innovation,” the book shows that the ideological establishment tried hard “right up until the end.” Given the customary dismissal of ideology in the late Soviet period, it is gratifying that the reviewers see the case for revisiting the role of ideology in the Soviet project, and I hope it might lead to more work that engages with Soviet ideology—for instance, as a mechanism for ordering Soviet public discourse around other thorny social and cultural questions, such as nationalities, aesthetics, and morality (issues that

the prophylactic work of the KGB organs” [Pechat’ – ostroe oruzhie v profilakticheskoi rabote organov KGB], *Sbornik statei po voprosam agenturno-operativnoi i sledstvennoi raboty Komiteta gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti pri Sovete ministrov SSSR* 6:3 (1960): 103-108, 103.

⁷ For much of the development of the field of Soviet studies, which took place in the context of the Cold War, taking ideology seriously was considered an inherently conservative position and largely dismissed by social historians (Ronald Grigor Suny’s “On Ideology, Subjectivity, and Modernity: Disparate Thoughts about Doing Soviet History.” *Russian History* 35:1-2 (2008): 251-258, illustrates this very effectively). Even with the so-called ‘return of ideology’ in Soviet studies after the end of the Cold War, the focus remained firmly in the early Soviet period and Stalinism, with little attention to the post-Stalin era. Late Soviet ideology is portrayed as essentially similar in nature to Stalinism, but without either the ideological fervor or the enforcement mechanisms to be effective (Martin Malia’s work, especially his *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994) is representative of a broader consensus). As Brandenberger writes in the opening of his *Propaganda State in Crisis*, “The USSR under Lenin and Stalin is often referred to as the world’s first propaganda state. That said, if ideology, propaganda, and mass indoctrination are often considered key characteristics of the Soviet ‘experiment,’ they’ve received surprisingly little scholarly attention in recent years.” See Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 1. See Steve Smith, “Two Cheers for the ‘Return of Ideology,’” *Revolutionary Russia* 17:2 (2004): 119-135.

remained on the ideological agenda until the end of the Soviet project).⁸ We are already seeing some terrific scholarship that does this, including Courtney Doucette’s terrific work on *perestroika* (the Soviet Union’s last ideological project).⁹

It makes sense, then, that of the three reviewers, Doucette most clearly centers ideology in her analysis, posing two questions that push on the book’s periodization and its definition of ideology. First, Doucette notes the book’s “attention to how the very purpose of ideology could change over the course of the Soviet period” but asks how, if ideology is ultimately about human transformation, the late Soviet period differs from the 1920s or 1930s. Second, with this comparison between the early and late Soviet period, Doucette asks how the book defines ideology, inviting a more direct engagement with the debate around Soviet subjectivities that dominated Soviet scholarship in the 2000s. Both of these are important and fruitful questions, and ones that I indeed largely side-stepped in the book, first, because I see a real rupture between the early Soviet period and the post-Stalin era, especially in the sphere of ideology, and second, because I understand ideology as a disciplinary instrument wielded by Soviet power, and in that sense as something related to but distinct from subjectivity.

With regard to the first question, as a number of works have shown, Alexei Yurchak’s *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* perhaps most prominently,¹⁰ the death of Joseph Stalin—not just as an individual but, more significantly, as the “master author” of Soviet discourse—fundamentally destabilized Soviet ideology, creating both a sense of uncertainty and a new space for creativity. Some see in this the decline of ideology’s role in the Soviet project, even the beginning of the end, and in a political sense I think that is right, since de-Stalinization took away the primary mechanism for the system’s reproduction: terror. At the same time, Nikita Khrushchev’s proclamation that the Soviet project had entered a new historical phase, ‘Building Communism,’ embodied in a new party program, speaks to the ways in which ideology came to matter more, both as a tool of governance and a mechanism for reconstituting moral legitimacy. The Soviet project was in a more mature stage; there were more resources, more social and political stability, less hierarchical authority, and therefore a wider scope for ideological innovation. On a more practical level, new political, economic, and social questions still needed “correct” answers. In producing these answers, the ideological establishment had to navigate an inherently contradictory situation: de-Stalinization had created the possibility, and even the need, for new ideological content and forms, but ideology still relied on a canon that had to provide answers for the future without fully breaking with the past—something that comes out, for example, in the meeting transcripts of the Academy of Social Sciences, where there is a distinct division between socialist reformers and dogmatic Stalinists. In short, it had to innovate while de-emphasizing innovation, which made ideological production fundamentally ambiguous.

The second question Doucette poses is about “what exactly ideology is” and where we should look for it. Doucette offers Jochen Hellbeck’s definition of ideology as “a ferment working in individuals and producing a great deal of variation as it interacts with the subjective life of an individual person,”¹¹ and argues that “ideology does not issue from above, but is co-produced by the state and citizens.” If we take ideology in this sense, Doucette writes, “it is unclear how ideology could matter so much, especially to the state, but not to the broader population.” However, I do not take ideology in this sense.

⁸ For example, in-house studies intended for internal consumption by cadres within the ideological establishment continued to be produced through the end of the Soviet period – for example, the Academy of Social Sciences reports, “New phenomena in ideological life and the development of theoretical thought in socialist countries” (1985), and “Notes to the Central Committee on the formation of the socialist way of life in socialist countries and its influence on the development of culture and art” (1985).

⁹ Courtney Doucette, “Perestroika: The Last Attempt to Create the New Soviet Person,” Ph.D. diss. (Rutgers University, 2017). I would also draw attention to the work of Anna Whittington. See Anna Whittington, “Forging Soviet Citizens: Ideology, Identity, and Stability in the Soviet Union, 1930-1991,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Michigan, 2018).

¹⁰ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12-13.

Instead, I see ideology, above all, as a disciplinary instrument. It can certainly be “unpacked and personalized” as it works through individual subjectivity, but in the process of “unpacking” it becomes something else. In key ways, this echoes the definition of the historical actors themselves. For those charged with producing it, ideology was closely related to the concept of ‘worldview,’ and was understood as a system of ideas and principles that, as historian David Brandenberger’s writes, “guide decision-making, legitimate the exercise of power and governance, and aid in the construction of governing culture and practice.”¹²

To make a distinction between ideology and subjectivity is not to say that ideology does not act on the subject and transform subjectivity. Indeed, it is precisely in this sense that we might see ideology doing the same work as (certain forms of) religion: the work of erasing doubt and forging conviction. This is why, in the book, the definition of ‘religion’—or rather, my solution to the impossibility of finding a definition of religion that works across temporal and geographic contexts—is to talk about “sacred space.” Another way of putting it is to see categories like ‘religion’ and ‘ideology’ as ways of ordering the world (through actions and beliefs, notions of time and space, conceptions of the self and relationships) that become, for those who live by them, matters of life and death. As unsatisfying as it might be for the academic reader, the concept of “sacred space” is left deliberately vague. It is intended to evoke rather than explain.¹³

In the Soviet context, where, in the words of one subject, “two ideologies” could not coexist, manifestations of ‘religion’—whether as engaged belief, passive participation in ritual, or even a vague acceptance of ‘mystical’ or ‘superstitious’ notions—were read as a marker of doubt, signaling a subject who was not fully committed to the party’s truth and authority. If we take ideology in this sense, then we can see why the party perceived ideological conviction, or its absence, as a matter of life and death. This is why it not only continued to see religion as a source of competition, but also why the object of atheist work transformed, in the late Soviet period, from religious ‘believers’ to the ideologically indifferent.

To return to the original question, Doucette asks not only what ideology is, but also where it is. What I try to show in the book is that ideology is produced and deployed by a specific sociological milieu. It is not co-produced by the state (above) and the people (below). Rather, I would argue that the primary site of ideological production is the *middle*. And it is here that I am especially grateful to Doucette for drawing attention to the methodological and theoretical specificity of ideology. She describes the methodology as a history “from the middle,” a term I do not use in the book, but one that captures something essential about the approach. What is history from the middle? I find the historian Paul Kennedy’s definition—that it is “the analysis of how things got done and who did it”—helpful in its simplicity.¹⁴ Kennedy also notes that, despite it seemingly being the very stuff of history, most historians have avoided the middle in favor of “history from above,” which focuses on the structures of power, and “history from below,” which focuses on how power affects the subjects who lives its shapes.

Putting aside why historians have overlooked it, what is the value of doing history from the middle? A different way to ask the question is: Who constitutes “the middle” and why do they matter? As Doucette notes, the book as a story about “how the state understood itself,” and its central characters are experts and functionaries whose mission was to turn political goals into ideological theory, and ideological theory into social practice. It is in this middle that theories were applied and their results evaluated. It is through the middle that theories were adapted, transformed, or abandoned. By looking at history from the middle, we are not focusing on “great” individuals and ideas (as in history from above), or “authentic” unmediated

¹² Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 5-6.

¹³ My point of departure, in using the term “sacred space,” is the sources themselves, which on several occasions invoke the proverb that “a sacred space is never empty.” In the book, this appears most prominently in the comments made by the Soviet writer Vladimir Tendriakov at the 1964 plenum of the Central Committee’s Ideological Commission, when discussing the shortcomings of antireligious measures that do not take the aesthetic, emotional, and experiential aspects of religiosity into account (132).

¹⁴ Paul Kennedy, “History from the Middle: The Case of the Second World War,” *Journal of Military History* 74:1 (2010): 35-51, 38.

experience (as in history from below). Instead, we are confronted with “middling” people operating within institutional structures. These structures, moreover, are not concerned with them as individuals, but with their ability to advance goals set from above. Those in the middle, then, are intermediaries between people and power; they try to do a good job at their assigned task, make a contribution to the larger goal, and rise in the ranks. And since they are typically subsumed within institutional functions, this makes them methodologically difficult to access. In the book, my goal was to populate the middle with people: to understand not just their functions, but also their upbringing and education, their motivations and frustrations, and how these formative experiences shaped their relationship to the project they served. What might we learn if we allow the middle to speak?

On Religion

In her review, Doucette also posits another question about who constituted the object of atheist work. More specifically, Doucette asks whether the ideological establishment’s interest in religion extended beyond Orthodox Christianity, and whether “in the mirror of atheism we can also see Islam or Judaism?” The short answer is: yes, but not enough. We certainly see an awareness of the country’s religious diversity in the appeal to ‘local’ and ‘ethnic’ cultures and traditions —through the use of ethnographic and sociological studies—in various forms of atheist work. This is especially pronounced in discussions about how to imbue new socialist rituals with cultural authenticity and emotional intensity. We also see an awareness of religious diversity in the fact that the Institute of Scientific Atheism established local branches across the USSR. Moreover, the Institute’s establishment of filial branches in the three republics where religious politics had come to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ukraine, Lithuania, and Uzbekistan) speaks to an attentiveness to the continued *political* relevance of religion (especially where religious and national identities overlapped). At the same time, it is worth underscoring that the Soviet state seemed to have a blind spot when it came to Russian Orthodoxy. Following Stalin’s 1943 rapprochement with the Church, the Soviet state rarely took Orthodoxy seriously as a significant political threat. Indeed, much as with its approach to the category of “Russianness” in the sphere of nationality, the state persisted in seeing Orthodox Christianity as the unmarked norm (as we can see by it being referred to simply as ‘religion’), whereas non-Orthodox groups were always marked as ‘other,’ in part simply by virtue of being named. This had the effect of reinforcing the distinctions, as well as the divisions, between these identities and communities.

Laurie Manchester raises a similar issue in her wide-ranging and perceptive review by asking whether, with the shift in the religious landscape after the war—when, on the one hand, the Orthodox Church returned to its pre-revolutionary role as an organ of the state, and, on the other, numerous confessions became associated with foreign enemies—the atheist apparatus acknowledged the confessional diversity of the USSR, or “social scientists studying atheism in the Central Asian republics [were] also concerned mainly with Orthodoxy?” This is a valid question, and much more can and should be done to address the varieties of atheist approaches across the Soviet Union. Indeed, one of the things that I found most interesting but could not develop in the book is that the atheist apparatus tried to imagine different atheist repertoires in response to specific religious cultures. “Orthodox atheism” was, of course, the normative point of departure for all atheist work, but it was not the only variant of Soviet atheism, and one of the things I hope we might see in further research is what a ‘Muslim,’ ‘Catholic’ or ‘Lutheran’ atheism looked like.¹⁵

I doubt, however, that more could have been done in this book. Even with the excellent recent studies noted by Manchester (by Emily Baran, Heather Coleman, Elissa Bemporad, and others)—to which I would also add Eren Tasar’s *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (2017), Robert Goeckel’s *Soviet Religious Policy in Estonia and Latvia: Playing Harmony in the Singing Revolution* (2018), Miriam Dobson’s current project on Protestant communities in the USSR from 1945-1985, as well as the work of a number of Russian scholars, like Nadezhda Beliakova and Aleksei Beglov—there is still too little work on religion in the postwar USSR to make broader claims (although Tasar’s book shows

¹⁵ *Islam v SSSR: Osobennosti protsessov sekularizatsii v respublikakh sovetskogo Vostoka, Akademiia obshchestvennykh nauk pri TsK KPSS* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1983); M. V. Vagabov, *Islam i voprosy ateisticheskogo vospitaniia* (Moscow: Vysshiaia partiinaia shkola, 1984).

that, in important ways, Russian Orthodoxy served as a template for Soviet religious policy toward Islam).¹⁶ It would be great, for example, to see a work for the Soviet period that does what Paul Werth's excellent *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia* did for imperial Russia.¹⁷ And this is not to speak of research on varieties of atheism in the Communist world, work on which we are only beginning to see.¹⁸ At the same time, it is worth noting that there is an abundance of *primary* sources on the varieties of Soviet atheism, including Soviet-era publications and dissertations, as well as the sociological surveys and ethnographic studies, which await their researchers in archives across the Former Soviet Union. I am working on an article, "Atheist Vernaculars: Confessional Atheisms across the USSR," which tackles some of these issues. Finally, Manchester's suggestion that "perhaps the monograph should have focused only on the Russian republic of the Soviet Union" would not offer a solution to the problem, since the majority of registered religious communities in the USSR—and this includes the Russian Orthodox—were concentrated outside of the RSFSR, and largely in Ukraine.

As one of our foremost scholars of religion in imperial Russia, Manchester also makes a number of useful interventions into the history of religion and the Orthodox Church, for which I can only be grateful. First, she draws attention to important continuities across Russia's revolutionary divide, including the perennial lament of officials and intellectuals that they were unable to reach the "barely literate masses"—a gulf that the Soviet state, with its full arsenal of social and political technologies, was still unable to bridge. She also draws attention to the ways in which the atheist project can be seen as part of the broader enlightenment project, and in this way helps place the Soviet experiment in a broader European context.

In a more critical tone, Manchester challenges some of the ways in which the book characterizes the Orthodox Church, especially in the background section of the first chapter, and the relative neglect of Orthodox theology. She argues that the church in the imperial period had more agency than the book allows, and her example of "the Church's objections to the abolishment of the patriarchy by Peter the Great in 1721, a loss it immediately rectified as soon as the Romanov dynasty fell in 1917," certainly illustrates the point well. Manchester is also less surprised than Soviet atheists that scientific atheism's "attempt to debunk religion with science and space travel utterly failed," since Orthodoxy's apophatic, or negative, theology, helps account for why the faith of believers remained intact despite Soviet cosmonauts pronouncing the heavens empty. The insight afforded by this theological explanation is both illuminating and beneficial, and I am grateful to Manchester for bringing it into the conversation, even if it is worth noting that assumptions about the threat posed to religion by scientism did not come from Soviet atheists, but had already been a source of anxiety among theologians and church figures both in

¹⁶ Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Robert Goeckel, *Soviet Religious Policy in Estonia and Latvia: Playing Harmony in the Singing Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018). Miriam Dobson's project is provisionally titled "Unorthodox Communities in the Cold War: Protestants, Secularisation, and Soviet Atheism, 1945-1985," and has an accompanying oral history website, "Protestant Communities in the USSR," that she organized with Nadezhda Beliakova.

¹⁷ Paul Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ On Estonia, see Atko Rimmel, "(Anti)-Religious Aspects of the Cold War: Soviet Religious Policy as Applied in the Estonian SSR," in Tonu Tannberg, ed. *Behind the Iron Curtain. Estonia in the Era of the Cold War* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015): 359-392, and "Ambiguous Atheism: The Impact of Political Changes on the Meaning and Reception of Atheism in Estonia," *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* 7 (2016): 233-250. On Ukraine, see Anna Maria Basauri Zyuzina and Oleg Kyselov, "Atheism in the Context of the Secularization and Desecularization of Ukraine in the 20th Century," in Bubík, Tomáš, Atko Rimmel, and David Václavík, eds. *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Development of Secularity and Non-Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Oleg Kiselev, "At the Periphery": Scientific Atheism in the Structure of the Institute of Philosophy." *Filosofs'ka dumka (Philosophical Thought)*, 6 (2016): 46-51 [In Ukrainian]; Oleg Kiselev, "Monograph 'Culture. Religion. Atheism' as a Document of the Times of Reorganization," *Istoriya rehliyi v Ukrayini. Naukovyy shchorichnyk (History of Religions in Ukraine. Scientific Yearbook)*, vol. 2-3 (2016): 43-51 [In Ukrainian].

Russia and beyond.¹⁹ But what I find most significant for the story of Soviet atheism is that people's ability to hold positions that they were told were contradictory, and even mutually exclusive (such as science and religion), speaks to the underlying limits of the category of 'belief' (whether theological or ideological) for explaining human commitments. Instead of belief, I would propose 'attachment'—which can engage not just ideas, but aesthetics and emotion, the body and materiality—as a framework that can help us understand why an individual might embrace one thing, without letting go of another.

Finally, Manchester calls for more attention to violence in the history of the Soviet state's engagements with religion and atheism, pointing to the numerous ways in which different forms of violence against religion and believers continued until the end of the Soviet period, even after the more visible repression and destruction of religious spaces, institutions, and people during the Stalin era. This is something I have thought about quite a bit since the publication of the book, and I agree that more attention to the role of violence is merited. Of course for most people, both in the academy and beyond, the story of Soviet atheism is *primarily* about violence, especially since most studies of religion were produced in the context of the Cold War.²⁰ This was my point of departure in the book, and what led me to emphasize the constructive elements of the atheist project over its repressive function. In this sense, I saw the book as more of a complement, rather than a revision, to the story. But in retrospect, I do think that the effort to write 'against the grain' led to a rather distorted picture that did not adequately acknowledge a number of basic truths: the scope and nature of religious violence in the early Soviet period,²¹ the fact that the USSR continued to have prisoners of conscience until the 1980s, and that human rights violations against religious believers and dissidents continued until Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. In the post-Stalin era, religious repression

¹⁹ These anxieties about the influence of modern science, reason, and nihilism on worldview suggest that they did not necessarily see faith as a simple way to get around the problem. See, for example, Todd Weir, ed. *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2012).

²⁰ This is especially the case in the work of émigré scholars like Dimitry V. Pospelovsky and Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, whose studies of religious life in the USSR were predominantly studies of religious repression, defined both broadly, in the sense of Soviet power disestablishing religious institutions, secularizing education, and limiting the space for permitted religious activities, and narrowly, in the sense of the destruction of churches and the persecution of clergy and believers. See, for example, Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, *History Of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice and The Believer* (Springer, 1988) and Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, "The Orthodox Church and the Soviet Regime in the Ukraine, 1953-1971," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 14:2 (1972): 191-212, as well as Bociurkiw's work on the Ukrainian Catholic Church (which was outlawed by Stalin during the Soviet period).

²¹ It is also worth noting the difficulty of quantifying religious repression in the USSR, not only because of the challenge of accessing reliable data, but also because the very definition of "repression" is unstable. In my view, Gregory Freeze offers the most useful overview of the effect of Bolshevik policies on the clergy, in that he both grapples with quantifying the scope, and acknowledges the methodological difficulty of the enterprise: "The Bolshevik regime subjected clergy to persecution, incarceration, and execution during the Civil War and selectively continued this repression in the 1920s. Although the number shot was far smaller than once claimed (1434—not tens of thousands), the repression impelled many clergy to swear "loyalty" to Soviet rule. Thus, to neutralize "counter-revolutionary clergy", the regime could rely on economic pressure and discrimination: astronomical tax rates, barring clergy from auxiliary employment as teachers or civil servants, and exclusion of their children in Soviet schools. Pariah status and poverty drove some priests to repudiate Orthodoxy and to defrock voluntarily; others lost their position because of parish ill will or because a parish lacked the means to support a full parish staff (priest, deacon, and psalmist). The net result, already apparent in the mid-1920s, was a social revolution in the parish clergy, with radical changes in its size, structure, composition, and educational profile." See Gregory L. Freeze, "From dechristianization to laicization: state, Church, and believers in Russia." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57:1-2 (2015): 6-34, 5. Freeze's analysis is based on the most thorough survey of sources to date, in multiple languages. The figures are based primarily on Sergei V. Leonov, "Antitserkovnyi terror v period Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii skvoz' prizmu istoriografii," *Vestnik Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo Gumanitarnogo Universiteta. Seriya II: Istoriia*, 57, No. 2 (2014): 38–55; T. G. Mikhailova [pseudonym for Leont'eva, Tat'iana G.], "K voprosu o prirode i masshtabakh bol'shevistskikh goneniï protiv Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v gody Grazhdanskoi voiny," in *Grazhdanskaia voina v Rossii: sobytiia, mneniia, otsenki*, edited by I. I. Korablev and N. A. Ivnikskii, 480–495. Moscow: Raritet, 2002. For an English language source that grapples with this question, see also Anna Dickinson, "Quantifying Religious Oppression: Russian Orthodox Church Closures and Repression of Priests 1917-41," *Religion, State & Society* 28:4 (2000): 327-335.

began to take on new forms, shifting from direct violence to more indirect ‘prophylactic’ measures, but its impact remained significant.

That the atheist project was unsuccessful even with a monopoly on power, truth, and violence makes the story more remarkable. It also suggests that we can still see the Church as something more than, in Manchester’s words, a “cultural artifact” incapable of posing a threat to the Soviet project. Even if the playing field in the party’s ideological “competition” with religion was markedly unequal, the very fact of religion’s persistence mattered. What is most relevant to my story, moreover, is that it mattered to the Party itself, which saw it as disrupting Soviet Communism’s ideological coherence by the simple fact of its existence as something that it itself had marked as “other,” as *not* Soviet. To be sure, for many Soviet people there was “no contradiction between being a Communist *and* a believer.” And yet, while the Party could tacitly have accepted the existence of religion and let atheism fade away (as it almost did in the late Stalin period), it did not. Instead, after Stalin’s death, it renewed its commitment to overcoming religion and creating an atheist society. This suggests two things. The first is that the argument put forward in Yuri Slezkine’s monumental study, that Bolshevism as a “faith” died after one generation, does not tell the full story.²² The faith of the elites may have disappeared, but as we can see from the stories of the atheist cadres at the center of the book, a new generation of Communist “faithful,” who often hailed from the Soviet Union’s provinces and peripheries, flocked to Moscow in the 1960s to join the ideological establishment and build careers by ‘building Communism.’ And second, it shows that while *we* might see Communism and religion as complementing one another and “providing a complete cosmology,” *they* (the atheists, the ideological establishment, and the party) did not. Even when the contradiction did not pose a problem to ordinary Soviet people, atheists remained committed to a binary logic that would not allow them to reconcile with reality. In this way, their constant anxiety about the vacuum at the center of Soviet ideology, and the lack of spirituality (*bezdukhovnost*) and indifference among Soviet people, kept them chasing an apparition of their own making.²³

On Secularization and Secularity

It may be counterintuitive to transition from this emphasis on the impossibility of defining religion to Sonja Luehrmann’s complex and instructive analysis of how the book speaks to studies of religion and secularism. Yet this is precisely why I am grateful to Luehrmann for drawing attention not only to what made the Soviet case distinct and even peculiar in the broader history of religion and secularization, but also to what it shared with societies across the Iron Curtain. This allows us to parse out which social transformations we can attribute to Soviet ideology, and which we can see as part of the social processes we identify with modernization, and to, in Luehrmann’s words, “stop relegating [atheism] to histories of ideology that are separate from the social processes of secularization.”

Before engaging with Luehrmann’s discussion of Soviet atheism’s relationship with secularization and the secular, I would first like to address something that Luehrmann, with her keen anthropological eye, notes the book does not do enough: address performativity, visual culture, and the body. How would the analysis change, Luehrmann asks, if we shift our attention from ideological discourse to “the aesthetic performance through which ideology became part of Soviet life?” As she points out, citing Malte Rolf’s work on Soviet festivals,²⁴ in the early Soviet period party ideologists distinguished socialist festivals from their folk counterparts by setting up a contrast between socialist “sobriety” and religious “intoxication.” Continuing the discussion of how an engagement with the visual culture of atheism might enrich the analysis, Luehrmann points out that although Soviet visual culture was indeed built on the religious visual vocabulary of Orthodox Christianity, which was ubiquitous, “few atheist posters would have served as a direct replacement for icons,” in

²² Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

²³ I am grateful to the anthropologist Sergey Shtyrkov for drawing attention to this phenomenon in his generous review of the book. See Shtyrkov, Review of “A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism,” *Laboratorium* 11:3 (2019):173-176.

²⁴ Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917-1991* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2014).

large part because their visual vocabulary was both modernist and didactic in its orientation. Atheists, Luehrmann posits, “look less eager to simply replace religious traditions”; instead, the goal of atheist rituals was to lead the participant to “a new way of being in the world, one that their organizers saw as more individualized, rational, and dependent on the past.” That this ideal of a sober, rational, disciplined subject informed much of Soviet ideological work is undoubtedly true. However, what I try to emphasize in the book is that the party came to recognize that Soviet people could not break their attachment to the “intoxicating” world of religion, and therefore to devote themselves body and soul to the Communist project, precisely because of the Party’s reliance on didactic tools that appeal to reason. As the deputy director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism put it in a discussion with his colleagues, religion had the power to bring congregations to tears, whereas “people do not shed tears at [atheist] lectures at all.” Soviet atheism’s goal was for Soviet people to cry “atheist tears,” and for this to happen, atheist cadres had to expand their repertoire (156-157). Overall, I wholeheartedly agree with Luehrmann that, even if these themes are not as central to the political processes at the center of the study, developing them more prominently would have enriched the analysis of ideology.

I am also grateful to Luehrmann for highlighting something that has not yet received much attention: the fact that, starting in the 1960s, Soviet and Western sociologists studying religion and irreligion shared many of the same concerns and discoveries. On both sides of the Iron Curtain we see observers’ anxieties about the breakdown in the reproduction of individual conviction in, and social mobilization around, both religious and ideological projects over generations, and note the rise of indifference, especially among the youth. “On both sides,” Luehrmann observes, “urbanization, nuclear family housing, and female employment may have had more impact on secularization than any conscious promotion of pro- or anti-religious views.” What is noteworthy here is not only that scholars on both sides of the Iron Curtain identified gender (especially the role of women) and generation as critical categories for understanding religion in their respective social landscapes, but that Soviet sociologists, in Luehrmann’s words, “pinpointed indifference to questions of religion and irreligion as a special problem whose causes and consequences deserved special study” earlier than their western colleagues. Luehrmann helpfully draws a connection between the sociological study of “indifference” in the Soviet case, and the current interest, in scholarship and in public life, in the category of religious “nones.” I certainly hope that colleagues who are interested in religion and secularism find the comparative framework that the history of Soviet atheism makes possible of some use.

So did Soviet atheism succeed or fail? This is the question I am asked most often. The story presented in the book is not a success story, if by success we mean not just achieving a society “free of religion,” but creating a society of convinced atheists. To be sure, as Manchester notes, “One could argue that the paltry knowledge of religion among almost all Soviet citizens when the Soviet Union collapsed is in fact the best indicator of how successful the Soviet Union was both at eradicating religion, and creating an atheist ideology, as evidenced by the intense revival of religions rushing to fill the void left after belief in Communism dissipated.” Leaving aside the post-Soviet religious revival, the meaning and contours of which are still quite hazy,²⁵ I would argue that even if Soviet society had indeed become more secular (less religiously literate and disciplined, and largely indifferent to the authority of religious doctrine and institutions), this did not mean that Soviet society had become atheist. Even if the processes we typically associate with secularization ‘succeeded,’ in that they fundamentally transformed Soviet people’s relationship with and attachment to religion, atheism—as an apologetic instrument used to buttress Soviet Communism as an ideology and political project—fell far short of the project’s own definition of success.

But, ultimately, why should we care about the project’s own definitions? This question—whether we should take seriously the observations, tribulations, and anxieties that Soviet atheists expressed in the transcripts of meetings and conferences, as well as the reports and sociological studies, that we find in the archives, or whether we should see these as largely performative acts divorced from actual views and beliefs—is one that Sonja and I had discussed on many occasions in our almost fifteen year relationship, which was cut short much too soon by her death on 24 August 2019. What is unusual about

²⁵ See, for example, Joseph Kellner, “As Above, So Below: Astrology and the Fate of Soviet Scientism.” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 20:4 (2019): 783-812.

the book's approach, Sonja observes in her review, "is that it takes the thoughts, doubts, and discussions of atheist scholars and bureaucrats almost at face value." I would not go as far as "face value," but in general, when it came to how we should read these sources, I was probably more sympathetic, whereas Sonja was more skeptical. I am not sure we ever came hard on either side, or even that we felt that taking a position one way or another was necessary. On my end, I was always grateful for the opportunity just to think through the questions with her, and that was enough. She was my main interlocutor, and I miss her dearly.