CHAPTER 10

From God-Fighters to Atheists: Late Soviet Kinship and Tradition as an Expanding Universe of Unbelief

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“You can't make an atheist out of a believer, but only a fighter against God.” With this popular saying, post-Soviet Russian citizens make claims about a certain superficiality of Soviet nonreligion, characterizing it as a stance of adolescent revolt and resistance devoid of positive content. The saying aptly captures some of the dynamics of the 1920s and 30s, when the focus of Soviet campaigns was primarily on destroying religious institutions. Peasants and workers participated in the looting of monasteries and temples, were required to watch the demonstrative exhumations of relics, danced in public parks that had once been cemeteries, and laughed at anti-clerical spectacles presented at public parades and festivals (Greene 2010; Husband 2000; Mitrofanov 2002). The features of carnivalesque reversal that were part of early Soviet anti-religious measures are indeed well described by the Russian term bogoborchestvo, god-fighting or struggling against God. Atheism, the affirmation of the nonexistence, and, by implication, irrelevance of God, seems to imply a more detached stance and the beginning of something new, a secular sphere of life that does not always set itself in oppositional contrast to religion (Engelke 2015).

Looking at the last decades of the Soviet Union, stretching from the 1960s to the 1980s, this article locates this “something new” in the growing experiential importance of relations of “medium transcendence” (Luckmann 1985; Schütz and Luckmann 1989) in late Soviet society. Like Soviet scholars themselves, I take changing kinship relationships and changing attitudes toward the past as signs of an “expanding universe of unbelief” (Taylor 2007: 352) in the world’s largest atheist state.

As the decades since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 wore on, new generations of Soviet citizens grew up in a society where the presence of organized religion was minimal. As atheism became an unmarked, normative way of being during the post-war decades, scholars and activists increasingly wondered what content it was acquiring beyond the denial of religion. Through archival documents and published Soviet sources, we can see this search for the contours of the qualitatively new social relationships that were expected to come with what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism” (2007: 19): the exclusion from the fabric of society of gods, spirits, dead ancestors, and rules sanctioned by these
powers. In sociological reports and policy discussions, the advance of atheism in society was not measured simply in terms of professed belief and unbelief in religious dogmas, but as changing relationships between generations, genders, and ethnic groups. More and more scholars have asked us to see atheism and secularity not just as intellectual positions but as lived orientations with practical and material consequences (Brown 2012; Copeman and Quack 2015; Farman 2013; Wohlrab-Sahr and Kaden 2014). Representing a society that was actively reflecting on the consequences of new generations growing up with decreasing exposure to organized religion, the case of the late Soviet Union allows us to see atheism as a social project that, in trying to position itself against religious legacies, takes on a life of its own.

Building Society, Building Atheism

The degree to which atheism in the Soviet Union ever was more than a thin ideological veneer over ongoing religious practice is a matter of dispute. For the sociologist Paul Froese, the revival of religion in the post-Soviet 1990s is a sign that secularization theories are inevitably flawed and that the Marxist regime failed “to understand core elements of human nature and human need” (2008: 165). Others go back into Soviet history for signs of the inevitable triumph of religiosity, arguing that a tacit return to religion on the part of the urban intelligentsia had been underway since the 1970s (Yelensky 2012). To make his case, Froese cites Soviet publications that continued to indicate stable or even rising levels of participation in religious rites of passage such as baptisms, circumcisions, and funerals throughout the post-war decades, which he sees as a direct indication of the failures of attempts to eradicate religion in the 1920s and 30s. The Soviet government and Soviet citizens indeed changed their course on religion several times, but these changes cannot simply be understood as failures or successes of the atheist project. Instead, they need to be seen as changes in the conceptualization of what it meant to build a secular socialist society.

From imperial Russia, the Bolsheviks inherited a society in which a functional differentiation of religious and political institutions had been under way since the time of Peter the Great, but where the two remained intimately connected at the level of government and also in such areas as criminal justice, vital statistics, and taxation (Wortman 2006; Werth 2014; Kizenko 2012). In the lives of Russian and non-Russian peasants, herders, and hunters outside of the westernizing cities, the sacred and the uncanny were even more closely intertwined with everyday subsistence and communal belonging (Balzer 1999; Luehrmann 2011; Paxson 2005). Relationships with living and dead kin, human