Sonja Luehrmann

Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic.

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The book by Sonja Luehrmann is a good combination of meticulous empirical surveys and interesting generalizations. Drawing upon the material on a particular Russian region, the Republic of Marii El (the former Mariiskaia Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, the author traces the intricate relationship of religion and secularism in Soviet and post-Soviet times. The Republic of Marii El is a modest, small and very special imperial borderland battered by periodic, gigantic waves of secularization and de-secularization, which often acquired a tangible local flavor. This authentic local flavor, and the book is one of the first studies to give us this first-hand knowledge, is what allows us to judge with some confidence the meaning of these major (national and even global) developments.

What broadens the picture is the selected lens that the author calls “historically-informed anthropology” (p. 222). The book starts with an overview of a religious regime in the Volga region from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century. The region is a complex network of ethnic and confessional identities, untangled by what the author calls “a tradition of interreligious neighborhood” at the level of particular small communities. Borders were built not so much upon dogmatic religious distinctions but rather upon local identities. Such a confessional mosaic was differentiating and also softening in interreligious relations; in fact, the region did not experience serious religious and ethnic conflicts in the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries.

The Soviet universalistic project saw religion only as a divisive source; it wanted to substitute its own, new, “rational” principles of solidarity to replace the old complex “unstable” mosaic. In the post-Soviet era, the oppressed “tradition of nationhood” has been partly restored but it has also responded to these major new influences: first, a revived religion of Chimarii, the autochthonous local “paganism,” and second, the Finnish Lutherans, a new phenomenon whose very “alienness” seems unintentionally to draw local Orthodox and “pagans” closer to an alliance against a common “other”; an alliance supported by the local post-Soviet authorities.

Intriguing observations emerge from the historical outline. The author discovers that despite an initial rigid ideological bias, the atheist clerks of the Soviet era gradually accepted a non-ideological and non-dogmatic confessional plurality and moved towards more pragmatic policies. In the same vein, the author concludes from the archival reports of Khrushchev-era meetings about
closing churches that local activists, while trying to follow the directives from above, had hardly mastered Soviet rhetoric. These meetings thus served for both sides as a school of Soviet official discourse (where all learned to speak Bolshevik, in Stephen Kotkin’s phrase) while also at times hearing “voices from below” (p. 106).

Luehrmann carefully documents how Soviet authorities tended to encourage local festivities that were “world-affirming,” “popular” and communal, and suppress “particularistic” rites of clans and families, which were more resilient to secularization, such as food offerings in anticipation of the harvest (agavajrem). She also provides an excellent discussion of how at the turn of the twenty-first century the Mari indigenous religion of Chimarii is being reinvented, growing from a loose mix of beliefs and practices into a “confession,” a “religion” – a process that includes both internal conversion and “Protestantization”.

Of special note is the chapter that analyzes the use of the concept of dukhovnost’ (spirituality) over time. It examines how the atheists turned the concept into the “spiritual values of socialism,” how spirituality is now interpreted by different competing confessions, and how the debates about dukhovnost’ reveal essential differences between the Russian Orthodox and the Charismatic Pentecostals. The distinction comes from Gombrich and Obeyesekere who described two forms of spirituality in Buddhist Sri Lanka: the concentrated “quiet” meditation and the exalted possession by spirits (p. 170).

Still, despite its variegated subject matters, the book has a clear and explicit leitmotiv: the impossibility, within the frame of concrete and socially significant human experience, to draw a precise boundary between the religious and the secular. The book shows how they interpenetrate and constantly overlap. Luehrmann notes that the actors themselves, both believers and Soviet activists, could not perceive this boundary with perfect clarity. This lack of clarity puzzles scholars as well, as they realize that the return of religion into the public sphere at the end of the twentieth century has shattered the rigid paradigm of secular modernity and breaks it into pieces. Faced with this epistemological challenge, Luehrmann believes that her method of “historically-informed anthropology” offers the best way out.

To provide a theoretical base for these metamorphoses of secular and religious, Luehrmann refers to the Weberian notion of elective affinity, thus alluding to the procedural and substantive similarities between them. Not the substitution of one by the other, but rather a complex and varying combination of the two in all periods. For example, during the transition from the pre-Revolutionary to the Soviet regime, the Soviet worldview, despite its consistent atheism, its refusal of “supernatural powers,” its refutation of the Durkheimean idea of religion as manifested social solidarity, and its reference to “exclusive