
Marx was the prophet, revolutionaries were the preachers, ideology was faith, revolution was the Last Judgment. Yuri Slezkine’s interpretation of Bolshevism as a millenarian sect in his monumental *House of Government* could be rendered in both soft and hard versions. Both would start with the observation that Bolshevik revolutionaries and religious sects displayed profound faith in the coming of a new world. In a less categorical version, Bolshevik collectivism and the revolutionary trajectory would be analyzed anew in light of remarkable parallels – and differences – with the history of those sectarianisms that attempted to become established religions. The contours of such a “soft” analogy between religion and politics were described in Igal Halfin’s well-known work on Soviet Marxist eschatology (remarkably, not cited by Slezkine): “Any comparison I suggest between Christianity and Marxism serves an analytical, not historical function. My reference to biblical terms throughout is no more than a heuristic device intended to evoke the deep plot of the eschatological master narrative.”

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Slezkine’s millenary epic (actually 1,104 pages) is inundated with biblical terminology for a more far-reaching, “harder” aim: to establish that Bolshevism was quite literally another millenarian sect in a line from Zoroaster, early Christians, Muslims, Münster Anabaptists, Jacobins, Mormons, Melanesian Cargo cults, and others (180). Chapter titles and references to the Flood, the Last Judgment, the Valley of the Dead, etc. are a rather heavy-handed stylistic device to argue by force of repetition. A soft claim would make the remarkable literary proliferation of religious imagery and biblical analogies among Bolshevik intellectuals into a problem for analysis; the hard version cites it on every possible occasion as proof. As for the Bolsheviks’ most relevant French revolutionary precursors, they remain but an entry in the list; other revolutions with their early modern religious-constitutional balance starting with Hus and the Dutch Revolt are not part of the analytical mix. The (secular) adaptation of very old religious concepts such as “new man” or “soul” in Bolshevism ideology and discourse is not a concern; nor is the actual historical traffic among sects, religion, and revolutionaries in pre-revolutionary Russia, which was substantial. Rather, for most of the book Slezkine hews to a hard version of his sectarian thesis: Christian original sin and religious heresy (“thought crimes”) were part of an original, religious totalitarianism. All millenarianisms, Bolshevism included, were the “vengeful fantasy of the dispossessed” (99, 957). Bolshevism’s nature as an apocalyptic sect, embedded within the history of all the others, explains the course of the Bolshevik Revolution and, by extension, the life of the Soviet Union.

The notion that communism was religious in nature goes back to such interwar writers as René Fülöp-Miller and Nikolai Berdiaev. The great intellectual historian Andrzej Walicki discussed how “totalitarian ideology is not merely a secularized religion; it is a secularized form of chiliastic religiosity.” The great Sovietologist Robert C. Tucker called the notion of a total regeneration of man a secular version of Christian salvation, dubbed Bolshevism a millenarian movement, and pointed out the growing resemblance of the party-state to a “church-state.” More recently, a large new literature on political religions and totalitarianism has been incisively critiqued, notably by Erik van Ree, discussed below. It is shocking how few of the most relevant works are included in Slezkine’s partial accounting (998 n. 1), and none are seriously engaged.

But Slezkine’s mission is hardly historiographical, and his work in this context is novel in several ways. In general, previous treatments focus on mature Stalinism as a political religion, look in particular to the legacy of Orthodoxy,

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2 For full references to all these works and others, see Michael David-Fox, “Opiate of the