

Religion as an object of science in atheistic society :

The Historical Museum of Religion and Atheism in the late socialist Russia.

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When “religions” are studied as an object of science, they are condemned to lose their transcendental and esoterical meanings. In this context, religious studies have facilitated the process of secularization and religious pluralism, and vice versa. In this presentation I’d like to show the meanings of “scientific atheism” in the process of secularization in Soviet Russia.

The definition of secularization is one of the most provocative questions among specialists. Generally speaking, secularization is the separation (or “emancipation”) of politics, education, economy and other social systems from religions¹. Secularization is not always equal to denial of religious belief, because it often respects liberty of thought and conscience. Soviet “scientific atheism” developed in its own particular way. Today we will examine its uniqueness, using the theory and activities of The State Museum of Religion as an example.

¹ Cf. Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformation of Religion*, London: Oxford University Press, 1976, Thomas Luckmann. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: Macmillan, 1967, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1967, Karel Dobbelaere, "Secularization: A Multidimensional Concept", *Current Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1981), pp. 3–213.

1. (What does it mean) To “exhibit” religions

There are few museums in the world to examine all the world's major religious faiths. The State Historical Museum of Religion (hereinafter called GMIR) is one of the oldest museums of such kinds. It is located in the center of St. Petersburg, which was named Leningrad in Soviet period. The Academy of Sciences, which was located in St. Petersburg, characterized this city as the center of science since the tsarist era.

An ethnographer and a corresponding member of Academy, L. Sternberg (1861-1927) and an anthropologist V. Bogoraz-Tan (1865-1936) took the initiative to organize an exhibition with religious material of Siberian peoples as early as 1923². It is interesting that both of them were (narodniki,) members of “The People’s Will” and were exiled to the Far East and Siberia, where they began to research the manners and customs of indigenous peoples.

Their understanding of religion was strongly influenced by Historical Materialism and Marxist theory. That is called “Religious Essentialism” and “Evolution theory of Religions”, both of which were widely spread in Western Europe during the establishment of religious studies, especially in the latter half of 19th century. According to the theory of “Religious Essentialism”, which was formed in the process of the colonization, the most primordial form of religion must show the essence of religions. A primordial form was thought to be developed toward higher and more sophisticated form in stages and in accordance with certain laws, that is the “Evolution Theory of

² Исторический архив Государственного музея истории религии. Ф. 1. Оп. 1. Д. 311. Л. 1, *Чумакова Т.В.* Музей истории религии: Академический период// Академия наук в истории культуры России XVIII-XX веков / Отв. ред. *Ж.И. Алферов.* - СПб.: Наука: С-Петербург. изд. фирма, 2010. С.206-246.
<http://www.religiopolis.org/religiovedenie/1998-muzej-istorii-religii-akademicheskij-period-2.html>

Religions”, which rests on the Hegel’s dialectic and philosophy of history³.

GMIR museum was established in 1932 and belonged to the Academy of Sciences. The exhibition showed the “emergence and evolution of religious faiths in accordance with the stages of social development”⁴. Not only materials for worship, but some antireligious posters and explanation were displayed in the exhibitions, because GMIR museum was expected to play a significant role in propaganda, too. Soviet religious studies should aim to disclose the “reactionary, class essential (реакционная, классовая сущность)” nature of religions. However, the curators had their own view on the antireligious propaganda, turning down the caricatures and other popular and often profane exhibitions as “vulgar”.

At the same time, as a fact the curators felt great difficulties to pursue their academic interest under the pressure of Soviet power, which expected the museum to be a center of antireligious propaganda. The museum changed the character of its activities, according to the religious policy of Soviet power. Thus, we can consider GMIR museum not only scientific, but also propagandistic.

2. Transition from “Anti-religion” to “Scientific atheism”

The religious policy in the 1920s-30s was carried out mainly by “administrative measures”, including compulsory disclosure of church buildings, seizure of property, and murder of clergymen and believers for the purpose of physical destruction of church. At the same time, as we examined, GMIR museum attached greater importance to

³ 渡辺学「宗教起源論と宗教学の起源」『宗教への視座（岩波講座宗教2）』岩波書店、2003年、120、122-123頁。

⁴ Чумакова Т.В. Музей истории религии АН СССР в начале 1930-х гг. С. 16.

“enlightenment” of people by propaganda.

After WWII Soviet power began to change the religious policy, which followed the “cultural approach”. This new direction about atheism was reflected in the two decisions of the communist party, both of which were adopted in 1954. These were the first official documents, in which “scientific atheism” was referred as a special term, being replaced “anti-religion”⁵. With these decisions “scientific atheism” became the main point of the religious and atheistic policy in late socialist Russia.

Especially the latter decision criticized the direct attacks on religions. In the decision it was recognized that there were certain local organizations and individuals allowed administrative interference in activities of religious institutions and groups, and that was asserted as “mistakes of antireligious propaganda”. The decision made a clear distinction between antireligious propaganda and the new direction of “scientific atheism”, saying “To correct failures of antireligious propaganda must not cause decrease of propaganda of scientific atheism”.

In other words, the scientific atheistic policy became more clearly and concretely after WWII. For example, people was expected to keep “the new socialistic rituals”, such as cerebations of new-born infants, marriage, entrance into certain social organizations, and to celebrate socialistic holydays, such as Victory Day, Revolutionary Day and so forth.⁶

Furthermore, the new direction attached greater importance to media and education for the purpose of propaganda of scientific knowledge and materialist thinking. Several scientific journals began to be published for researchers and propagandists. Popular science journal “Science and Religion («Наука и религия»)

⁵ Костылев П. Н. Российское религиоведение: вчера, сегодня, завтра.

⁶ Cf. Christel Lane, *The rites of rulers : ritual in industrial society : the Soviet case.*

also began to issue since 1959.

Universities and other institutions of higher education had started the “Elementary course of Scientific Atheism” for every student since 1959, and had made it a compulsory subject since 1964⁷. Thus, the role of propaganda became more important during the last decades of Soviet Russia⁸.

GMIR museum also followed this direction. The general plan and purpose of the museum in 1953 declared that “Soviet historiography is free from a vulgar materialist understanding of religion. Such an understanding denies the active role of religious ideology in a developing society, and lumps together a range of historical issues of religion and atheism as propaganda of military atheism.”⁹ In this context, GMIR claimed to be one of the biggest centers of “religious studies” in Soviet Russia.

People noticed the change itself, however even specialists and propagandists didn't know well the difference of connotations between “anti-religion” and “scientific atheism”. This fact suggests that the greater part of Soviet people took part in creation of atheistic society not positively but passively.

3. Theory and Practice of GMIR museum

In 1961, GMIR museum was transferred from the jurisdiction of the Academy of Sciences to that of the Ministry of Culture. It meant that the museum was requested to

⁷ Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*, pp. 40-41, David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union*, p. 56.

Гаркавенко Ф. ред. О религии и церкви: Сборник документов. М., 1965. С. 87. О мероприятиях по усилению атеистического воспитания населения // *Партийная жизнь*. 1964. № 2. С. 23.

⁸ David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union*, p. 7.

⁹ Исторический архив ГМИР. Ф. 1. Оп. 1. Д. 311. Л. 2.

play a greater educational and propagandistic role. The curators were sent all around the Soviet Union, giving lectures about scientific atheism, and researching the activities and thoughts of clergymen and believers¹⁰. They got to know the atheistic and religious activities in local areas through their field works. They realized the difficulty in spreading of a way of thinking of scientific atheism, especially in rural villages. Now I will illustrate some field works by the museum in the 1960s.

In order to ascertain the reason why atheistic propaganda didn't have enough effect on population, the curators investigated religious faiths and customs in Vyborg city from 1962 until 1964. Vyborg is located not far from the border with Finland, and was annexed to USSR in the result of the Soviet-Finnish war in 1944. After the war the Finnish resident left, while immigrants from different cities of USSR made up the larger part of the population¹¹.

The curators inquired of 200 families about their cultural activities, family members, school education and so forth. This inquiry illustrated that a family out of every 10 in the center of the city, and a family out of every 5 in the suburbs held icons in their home. Most of believers were old people and they visited Orthodox churches just out of habit. The number of baptize was clearly reduced from 1963 to 1964¹². These facts show that Vyborg was a rare model of atheistic society. It is because the war and immigration destroyed religious traditions of the city.

The curators found much higher religiosity in the western part of Pskov prefecture,

¹⁰ *Шердаков В.Н.* Музей истории религии и атеизма в системе научно-атеистической пропаганды// Вопросы научного атеизма. №19. 1976. С. 97-98.

¹¹ Riita Kosonen, *Governance, the Local Regulation Process, and Enterprise Adaptation in Post-Socialism: The Case of Vyborg* (Helsinki: Helsinki School of Economics, 2002), pp. 119-122. 1945年に16,400名だった人口は、1970年には65,000名まで回復した。

¹² Исторический архив ГМИР. Ф.1. Оп. 1. Д. 587. Л. 1-4.

which had belonged to Estonia until 1940, and then had been occupied by Nazi Germany for 4 years. Visiting a factory in 1963, curators found more than 64% of the inquired families had icons in their home¹³. According to the report, under the considerable influence of Pskov-Peterskyi monastery, which did not be closed thorough Soviet era, people could not go to the Kolkhoz club to listen to the atheistic lectures, because participants might be despised, or beaten by others¹⁴. When a leader of certain village club planned to make a play, named “talking icons”, no one accepted to appear on the stage. As a result the leader had no choice but to play in it by himself, while after the play the village ignored him as a despicable man.

At the same time the curators hold atheistic seminars for local propagandists in 3 cities of the prefecture, and asked the participants about their struggle with religious superstitions. However most of the participants didn't answer: only 5 person responded out of 20 participants of the seminar in Pechery, 5 person out of 100 in Ostrov, and 25 person out of 60 in Never'¹⁵.

Tikhvin region of Leningrad prefecture to 200 km the west of its capital was famous for the tradition of Old Believers, who hold several strict religious customs. In this region the atheistic propaganda was conducted by the former members of the League of Militant Atheists, who was around 70 years old, while the younger generation did not so actively take part in it. Although more than 150 people had got the special education of atheism in order to be propagandists for the last 10 years, only less than 10 persons actually conducted their atheistic tasks.

People who tried to practice scientific atheism seriously (on constative dimension)

¹³ Исторический архив ГМИР. Ф. 1. Оп. 1. Д. 531. Л. 2.

¹⁴ Исторический архив ГМИР. Ф. 1. Оп. 1. Д. 548. Л. 4.

¹⁵ Исторический архив ГМИР. Ф.1. Оп. 1. Д. 547. Л. 2.

were often considered to be “heretics”, because religions and communism coexisted “peacefully” in such areas. Another important point is there existed influence of scientific atheism. A large majority took part in atheistic seminars and meetings, celebrated important rites of passage and holidays (on performative dimension), though it did not mean actually they internalized a materialist way of thinking.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of scientific atheism was to spread a view of the world based on materialism, not to attack religious organizations and believers. Religious studies, which treat religions as an object of science, got to be almost equal to scientific atheism, leaving the border between science and propaganda ambiguous. On the one hand, soviet religious studies investigated the actual religious activities in society. On the other, researches should testify the validity of the “Evolution Theory of Religions”, and that was their most important task. The most of Soviet people thought about atheistic meetings and lectures, socialist rituals and holydays, and its representations as a result of decline of a religious view of the world.

Thus, scientific atheism became more and more predictable, uninteresting and insubstantial. Today many Russians say that they have never been atheists in spite of the official politics, however the majority took part in the atheistic events, even if in passive way. Scientific atheism facilitated a particular secularism in Soviet Russia in this way.