

Research Report

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Project Title: Enemies in Cassocks and the New Saints. Anti-religious Propaganda and the Creation of Religion for the “new man”

During my one-month stay in the Open Society Archives, I focused on the interpretation of atheism and religion, as fundamentally opposed world-views, in the last decades of the USSR. I worked with articles published in the Soviet media after 1964¹, in the period which, after the previous Khrushchev's period, was typical with a relatively calm relationship between the registered religious communities and the state and which culminated in distortion of relatively stable image of religion and believers in discourse. My research concerned the process of fixation of their identities through articulation practice, the rules which underlied the statements on religion and atheism, the grammar which determined which of them were considered common sense, which problematic and which simply impossible. Of special interest were the conditions that governed the communication and affected the stability of Soviet discourse and, in connection with this, also the process of modelling and the process of falling apart of the enemy-images.

My research in the Open Society Archives is a continuation and addition of my previous work which covered modelling the image of the Russian Orthodox Church and the orthodoxy in the Perestroika and post-Soviet public discourse and the process of fixation of their identities through articulation practice.² The centre of my attention has so far been mostly the period of *perestroika* and the first decade of existence of the Russian

¹ I focused on articles on religion, church and state, trials, anti-religious propaganda and „relics from past” collected in Soviet „Red“ Archives (HU OSA 300-80-1) and Samizdat Archives (HU OSA 300-85-12).

² Results were published in Cingerová, Nina: *Církev a štát v postsovietskom Rusku*. In *Os*, roč. 11, č. 4 (2009), s. 7-17; *Как играется симфония. Концептуализация Русской православной церкви на уровне масс-медийного дискурса*. In *Новая русистика*, roč. 4, č. 2 (2011), s. 13-37; *Modelovanie náboženstva v sovietskom verejnom diskurze v období rokov 1985-1987*. In *Jazyk a kultúra*, roč. 3, č. 10 (2012).

Federation. These periods are interesting for me because the society was confronted with new events that it had to adopt and explain. I have been interested in borders of flexibility of the relatively stable Soviet discourse, in what and how it was able to incorporate and where it was not able to accept the new events anymore and opened space for the struggle around construction of a new set of frontiers, for the struggle around the attachment of floating signifiers - such as 'democracy', 'solidarity', 'freedom of consciousness' – to new nodal points such as the 'class struggle' in the Soviet-era discourse, which was in a position of a privileged point and as such associated other points around itself and determined their meaning. The richer this chain of signifiers, the higher mobilising power this privileged point gained and the more simplified the political space was becoming.³ After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the moment of setting itself apart from both the West and East became prominent in the public discourse and postulated the existence of a unique path for Russia. The civilisation narrative started appearing in humanities publications at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s and the idea of unique local entities was frequently *instrumentalised* also in the political discourse of the 1990s. The epistemological framework of the civilisation, which accentuated spiritual and religious values, allowed installing the orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church to the position of a Russian collective identity construct, and the struggle for their privileged position could be perceived as one of the struggles for Russia. The „spirituality“ featured as a referent of the security policy and became politicised to the greatest possible extent. These findings allowed to clarify the context in which the law from 1997 was drafted. It was under the influence of the patriotic discourse and introduced a hierarchy of churches and religious organisations based on their contribution to building the Russian civilisation.

The period I have chosen for my research in Open Society Archives is a period, in which certain relaxation of administrative pressure (RFE reported even about a small number of churches, that have been reopened) occurred and a certain juridical frame for the existence of religious communities was formulated. The main emphasis in the anti-

³ See Laclau, Ernesto: *Emanzipation und Differenz*. Wien, Berlin: Turia + Kant, s. 70-71; Torfing, Jacob: *Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges*. In *Discourse Theory in European Politics : Identity, Policy and Governance*. Edited by D. Howarth, J. Torfing. Hampshire; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, s. 16; Жижек, Славой: *Возвышенный объект идеологии*. Москва: Художественный журнал, 1999, s. 92-94.

religious propaganda was on the struggle against religious ideology and morals which were perceived as incompatible with the life of “new man”.

To speak about Marxism-Leninism as political or secular religion, with his own doctrine of salvation, prophets and founders of the faith can be an analysis tool for examining the phenomenon and its clarification. A lot of analogies at the level of form and content between Marxism-Leninism, which “preached” scientific atheism, and the religion can be found.⁴ The cross was replaced by the sickle and hammer, icons by portraits of Marx, Lenin and Stalin, whose depiction, as in the case of the Orthodox icons, followed exactly set rules. The Bible as a sacred text was replaced by works of Marx and Lenin which could not be challenged. New Soviet rituals, which were supposed to replace the religious ones, were being introduced: red baptism (baby-welcoming ceremonies), red funerals or red weddings. Article 52 of The RSFSR Code of marriage and the family even required parents to bring up children as „worthy members of a Socialist (*which meant atheist*) society“. Evasion of parental responsibilities, „harmful influence“ could, according to article 59, result in deprivation of parental rights. Churches, prayer houses and mosques were replaced by houses of atheism whose goal was to spread the scientific atheism propaganda through lectures, seminars, topical evenings or conversations with believers. “Sins“ (грехи) were replaced by „moral vices“ (нравственные пороки), “belief”, “faith” (вера) by “conviction” (убеждение) which, similarly to religion, regulated all spheres of life. Promoters, who were part of the hierarchized structure, acted in a role of missionaries and people were treated like believers.

During my stay in Open Society Archives I made a case study of handbooks and articles, which deal with propaganda of atheism. The significant issue was that it was not enough for a person to be a non-believer; it was necessary to “convert” him or her to a convinced atheist who was supposed to spread the “gospel”. It was being stressed out that indifferent attitude to questions of atheism and religion could lead to a direct support for the religion. Preservation of its traditions and rituals were considered such a support. The *Individual Work with a Believer (Experience of a Promoter of Atheism)* handbook by

⁴ See Riegel, Klaus-Georg: Marxism-Leninism as Political Religion. In *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, Vol. II, Edited by Maier, H., Schäfer, M., New York: Routledge, 2007, s. 61-113.

A.M.Foygel⁵ defines the transition to “non-belief” as a separate stage and the transition from the “non-belief to atheistic conviction” as another stage. The person was not seen as fully-fledged until he or she got through this stage (he/she was ideologically immature, (мировоззренчески незрелый) and was referred to as a person under care or fosterling (подопечный) in this text.

Journalistic texts often used metaphors of health. A believer was modelled as mentally retarded or mentally ill which was directly reflected in a fact that the believers were often locked up in psychiatric hospitals, it was supported in practice. „The interest in mysticism“ was mentioned together with problems such as alcoholism or drug addiction. They belonged to the same category of phenomena which benumb senses and can cause various mental disorders. The believer acted as a backward person alienated from the collective.⁶ The fear of damnation, of not being saved, of being alienated from God and God’s love, was replaced by the fear of being alienated from the society, from the collective. Principles of the Holy Script were considered asocial and thus amoral and anti-Soviet. The religion acted as an ideological danger for the system, as something that jeopardises the whole society and something against which it is necessary to fight without a compromise. However, it is characteristic that when a particular, ordinary representative of what was perceived as a relic entered the scene, he was described as a roguish fraudster, as someone who lacks magnificence of “high evil” (reports from court cases, HU OSA 300-80-820). The function of a religious community was taken over by the work collective which was supposed actively to help with overcoming the belief and strengthen the atheist conviction. From the atheism promoter’s point of view, fighting for each “lost soul” was important.⁷ Articles included suggestions how to strengthen the conviction by reading literature – classics of Marxism and Leninism – which played the role of sacred texts; the concept of an own “spiritual father” who helps a “convert” to

⁵ Фойгель, А. М.: *Индивидуальная работа с верующими (из опыта пропагандиста атеизма)*.

Москва: Знание, 1988 (HU OSA 300-80-33).

⁶ Typical headlines reflecting this estrangement: Чужие (In *Молодежь Молдавии*, 18.11.1986, с. 2), Уход (In *Комсомольская правда*, 22.3.1984, с. 2), Дом с закрытыми ставнями (In *Комсомольская правда*, 29.5.1975, с. 4), Девочка рисует березы, а рисовала пасхальные открытки (In *Комсомольская правда*, 30.5.1978, с. 2).

⁷ See Если даже один... In *Красная звезда*, 21.3.1964, с. 2.

adopt basic “dogmas”, the concept of the “spiritual father’s” care for persons under his custody.

The reception of Marxism-Leninism as religion is important also in the respect of communication situation, it allows to grasp its specific nature. Texts describing events were always in connection with a hierarchically higher (canonical) text. The practice could thus be in compliance with the theory. The fashion of wearing a cross was becoming an illustration of “flirting with God”, words about Orthodox roots of the Russian culture were “ideological diversion”. Syntagmatic relationships to which the “religion”, “church” or “believers” could enter were thus strongly reduced. This scheme of communication, in which the “higher text” had a priority, and an event, an action always “ment” according to this “higher text”, contributed to continuous repetition of basic dogmas of Marxism-Leninism in the public space. That is why the Russian semiotician G. Pocheptsov writes in view of this about the ritualisation of the soviet information space.⁸

In the second half of the 1980s the identities of particular groups, persons, society and events begun to be open for new interpretations, new readings. An important turning point in the discourse comes in the second half of the 1980s as celebration of the millennium of the baptism of Rus (Christianisation of Russia) approaches. After the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in January 1987, when *glasnost* was newly defined, opinions sympathising with the Church started appearing in the media and religious representatives express their ideas also on topics other than the “struggle for peace” and begun to take part in a quite extensive discussion of a new topic: the moral degeneration of Soviet society.

The Central Committee’s publication, *Kommunist*, which was since 1987 edited by N. Bikkenin, who belonged to Gorbachev’s intellectual staff, joined this changes too. The anniversary of the baptism of Rus was approaching and the August 1987 edition included an article by B. Raushenbakh which sees the transition from paganism to Christianity as a progressive process, as the transition to the “civilised religion” and praises the importance of baptism in the Russian history.⁹ After the period when the millennium of Christianity was seen as an exclusive matter of the Church with which the atheist state

⁸ Почепцов, Георгий: *Семиотика*. Москва: Рефл-бук, Баклер, 2002, с. 248-249.

⁹ Раушенбах, Б.: Сквозь глубь веков. In *Коммунист*, 12 (1310), Август, 1987, с. 99-106.

should have nothing to do, this was a statement which is worth our attention. Even more because the religion was defined in relation to the society, and not only in relation to ideology. It is also interesting that the author sees the “civilised” and “non-civilised” religion as antagonistic, and not for example the “religion of masses” and the “religion of the ruling class”. This, too, shows that the religion started to emerge from the category of a dangerous relic from the past and a tool of a class enemy. Raushenbakh’s attitude was important also because a representative of an important scientific discipline like physics commented on the baptism of Rus in a journal like *Kommunist*.

These changes culminated when M. Gorbachev met representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Kremlin in April 1988. Of course, there is a potential parallel with Stalin’s meeting with three metropolitans, Alexey, Sergey and Nikolay, in 1943. This meeting took place in special circumstances. Hierarchs learned of it only on the day when it happened, it took place at night and only a short report was published in newspapers on the next day. This time, everything was different: the Church representatives had a chance to prepare for the meeting and the main dailies informed about the event in articles covering one to two pages and were accompanied with photographs.¹⁰ From the point of view of symbolism, it is worth noting that the photographs show that Gorbachev and the Church representatives were seated at a round table which can be understood as a presentation of an equal position of all participants. Such communication can be interpreted not as a monologue of the dictator but a dialogue of equal partners. The Secretary General’s speech touched on tragic events from the Stalinist era, rehabilitation of mistakes and the big issue of *perestroika* which will unite the believers in the country, all its workers. Appealing to the common place of memory (Stalinist repressions), common future and softening of the “us and them” semantic opposition testified about the change in perception of the Church and the believers. Accentuation of the definition of the Church in relation to the society allowed the Church to become an ally. And what is important, it commented on social issues and this meant that it was accepted as a social institution, the organisation associating a high number of Soviet citizens, and not as a group of enforcers and worshippers of a (from the Marxist ideology’s point of view hostile) cult. The religion gradually ceased to be interpreted only

¹⁰ Встреча Генерального секретаря ЦК КПСС...In *Правда*, 30.4.1988, с. 1-2.

as a “bourgeois ideology” and in the following period it was ever more frequently written about as an “intellectual phenomenon” whose doctrines are suffused with the social issues. There was a significant shift also in the fact that it was interpreted as an element of the national (национальной) culture without the “reactionary” attribute. Paraphrasing the title of A. Yurchak’s book, we could say that the “religion was nowhere until it was everywhere”. In a certain sense, the religion was always present in the Soviet society, in opposition to the scientific atheism, in a differentiating relationship which determined its identity.

My research in OSA fulfilled my expectations and I reached a progress in the completion of my monography. It was very helpful that after experiencing time-demanding research, I could work with ready corpuses of data on the church, religion, believers and atheism. Inclusion of clippings from regional press opened also new questions about the nuances in modelling of particular entities¹¹, to which I plan to dedicate my further research. I would like to use this occasion to thank the Visegrad fund and the Open Society Archives for this possibility and OSA staff for their helpfulness and support. Especially I would like to thank the Research room staff for creating a pleasant working environment and for their friendly approach and willingness to help.

¹¹ See also the report from O. A. Tchabor (HU OSA 300-80-1-804, No. 281)