

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Atheist Secularism and Its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia* by Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada

Review by: Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal

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If there was one common theme that could bring all the chapters together, it might be the idea of discarded or abandoned archives, those “orphan sources that come without identification numbers or certification” (16). In the chapter “The Panama Hotel,” Brown explores the possessions left behind by Japanese Americans in Seattle before they were forcefully “evacuated” in 1943 to a “relocation” camp in Idaho as “enemy aliens.” Never reclaimed, these possessions stayed for decades in the basement of the hotel, archiving the painful history of dispossession. The second dispatch—from the Chernobyl zone—is also a story of a forced abandonment. Brown uses the zone to highlight a problematic distinction between “artifacts” and “documents.” Discarded but not destroyed, this spatial archive of a major catastrophe exhibits “what happens to “truth” when we no longer know how to authenticate it” (55). In the chapter “Bodily Secrets,” Brown shifts her focus from possessions and places left behind to the people who have been used, abused, and finally neglected by the state. The bodies of her interlocutors, former workers of a nuclear plant in Ozersk, became crucial archives, storing “strontium-90 and plutonium in bone marrow, iodine-131 in thyroids, cesium-137 in endocrine glands, hearts, spleens, soft tissues, and muscle” (66), with no instruction as to how to read these “corporeal repositories.” “Sacred Spaces in a Sullied Garden,” the fourth dispatch, explores yet another agentive power of objects. In this case, Brown focuses on the history of the grave of Nahman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Elieser. Buried in 1810 in Uman’, Nahman became a cult figure for his disciples, who would spend every Rosh Hashanah by his grave. The Bolshevik revolution, wars, and the Holocaust interrupted the tradition; however, in the 1990s, the pilgrimages resumed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the grave continues to act as a site of attraction for thousands of worshipers, seemingly unperturbed by a complete lack of the original context. This synchronicity of spatial distinctions is foregrounded even more in the fifth dispatch from Kazakhstan and Montana. Comparing Karaganda, a place that emerged out of a Gulag labor camp in the Kazakh steppe, with Billings, a railroad city in Montana, Brown shows how these two icons of modernity shared the same foundational desire to see in the land inhabited by aboriginal peoples nothing but an empty canvas that should be turned into a gridded space. The ordered urbanism of these locations, then, emerged as a perceptual trace of the erased pre-histories of modernity, as an archive of destruction in the name of progress. The final dispatch from Elgin, Illinois is a way of homecoming: it is about Brown’s own hometown, yet another emblem of the rust belt of America, a material leftover of industrial modernity.

“Places of advanced marginality,” as Brown calls them, these locations are more than sites of melancholic investment and romantic fascination with the “ruins of porn and rustalgia” (149). As the historian convincingly suggests, these places allow us to “conceive of history outside of the nation-state and detached from national histories” (150). Superbly written, persuasively argued, and emotionally nuanced, this book should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in the humanities.

SERGUEI OUSHAKINE
Princeton University

Atheist Secularism and Its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia. Ed. Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2015. xii, 293 pp. Notes. Bibliography. \$100.00, hard bound. doi: 10.1017/slr.2017.94

This book treats secularism as a variegated phenomenon that is “produced through interaction of religious practices, political reform and state-building” (Introduction,

15). The editors claim that previous studies of secularism were insufficient and incomplete, because political practice in communist regimes absorbed rather than excluded religion as a presence in the public sphere, “defining, co-opting, and appropriating religion and religious forms was central to communist political practice and political imaginaries” (19).

Part I, “Genealogies,” describes ways in which religion was central to the process of state-building. Chapter 2, “God and the Vietnamese Revolutions: Religious Organizations in the Emergence of Modern Vietnam,” by Jayne S. Werner, emphasizes the Viet Minh’s focus on decolonization and cultural revolution, and its toleration, even cooperation, with religious reform organizations, Buddhist and Catholic, during the struggle for independence. After independence, the Viet Minh did not attack religion *per se*. They regarded it as part of the national culture.

In Chapter 3, “The Socialist Interregnum (1975–1991) and Buddhist Resurgence in Laos,” Grant Evans observes that the Laos Communist Party was anti-colonial, rather than anti-religious. After a brief, unsuccessful, attempt to ban religion, the Party sought to co-opt and reform Buddhism, which became the *de facto* national religion.

In Chapter 4, “Conflict and Coexistence of Church and State Authorities in (Post) Communist Poland,” Anieszka Pasięka emphasizes coexistence and cooperation rather than conflict. Under the Communist regime, the Catholic Church gained privileges, entered the political arena, and influenced legislation, even preventing a referendum on abortion. State officials and ordinary parishioners hesitated to antagonize the clergy, lest priests refuse to officiate communion or officiate at other religious rituals.

In Chapter 5, “Secularization Without Secularism: The Political and Religious Configuration of Post-1989 China,” Ji Zhe describes the Party’s policy, begun in 1993, of adapting religion to state needs in a new political incarnation of Confucianism that emphasizes the Confucian virtue of harmony to squelch dissent, promote stability, and cement state power.

In Chapter 6, “North Korea’s Culture of Commemoration,” Heonik Kwan focuses on the government’s commemoration of the heroic “Manchurian faction,” led by the young Kim Il Sung, in the battle against Japanese imperialism in the 1930s. The Korean War is barely commemorated at all. The “Manchurian faction” used the commemorations to purge their rivals, solidify their power, build a family dynasty, and create a militant national ideology.

Sonja Luehrmann argues in Chapter 7, “Was Soviet Society Secular?” that despite all the “faith talk,” Soviet ideology is not a religion because it relies on human beings rather than appeals to divine power and does not attempt to transcend this world.

Part II of the book, titled “Creative Destruction,” brings together several descriptions of new forms of religiosity. In Chapter 8, “Apologetics of Religion and Science: Conversion Projects in Contemporary China,” Dan Smyer Yu argues that Chinese communism has characteristics of a pseudo religion that uses modern science to compete with traditional religions. The Chinese Communist Party is engaged in a grand conversion ritual aimed at disciplining the body and remapping the mind. The religion of the state has found popular acceptance, Yu concludes, but religion itself is still marginalized.

In Chapter 9, “Perun Versus Jesus Christ: Communism and the Emergence of Neo-Paganism in the USSR,” Victor A. Shnirelman traces Soviet neo-Paganism back to Soviet anti-westernism and the desire to develop an ethnic faith to provide ideological support for Russian nationalism. Promoters of neo-paganism regard ancient Russian paganism as part of an original folk culture, not as a religion. Contemporary neo-paganism is laced with anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, occultism, and in some cases, anti-Christianity because it stemmed from Judaism. In recent years, a revived

Russian Orthodoxy has become the de facto state religion, but neo-paganism still has adherents.

In Chapter 10, “Conversion To Be: The Christian Encounters of North Korean Migrants in the Late Cold War,” Jin-Heon Jung explains the rapid rise of Christianity between 1895 and 1910, limns similarities and differences between Juche ideology (the ideology of North Korea) and Christianity, suggesting that certain similarities prepared some North Koreans to convert to Christianity.

Clemina Antonova describes early Soviet rulers’ attempts to sever art and religion by moving icons from churches to galleries and museums in Chapter 11, “The role of Religious Art in post-Communist Russia.” The link between art and religion was rediscovered during the Gorbachev era, along with early 20th century Russian religious philosophy. The Gorbachev generation hoped that religious art would provide a model of organic unity. Particularly influential was the scientist/priest Pavel Florensky’s essay “Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts,” which contended that art cannot be divorced from its context. So important is religious art to the present Russian government that the return of an icon from the United States in 2004 was celebrated in a ceremony attended by Vladimir Putin and the Orthodox Patriarch.

In Chapter 12, “Chinese Socialism and the Household Idiom of Religious Engagement,” Adam Yuet Chau argues that religious practices intersect with broader societal forms. Land reform increased the number of middle peasants, hence the number of households. Collectivization eliminated individual households, but they were later restored. They were atomized, but that enabled providers of religious services to keep a low profile and this turned out to be an advantage.

In Chapter 13, “Awkward Secularity: Between Atheism and New Religiosity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” Mathijs Pelkmans contends that the Soviet project left a legacy of disbelief, but didn’t extend to pure atheism. Almost all Kirghiz claim to be Muslim, even if they also claim they are “not religious.” Newly pious Muslims do not drink liquor and follow traditional practices. Other Muslims seem to resent them. Discussion abounded on what it means to be a Muslim. Some Kirghiz try to separate religion and culture.

Students of Soviet Russia are familiar with co-optations and appropriations, but they will benefit from accounts of secularization in other communist countries. This book is highly recommended to scholars interested in the interplay of religion, politics, and culture.

BERNICE GLATZER ROSENTHAL
Fordham University

Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, & State-Sponsored Popular Culture in The Soviet Union, 1945–1970. By Gleb Tsipursky. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. x, 366 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$29.95, paper.

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“Socialist fun was serious business,” (221) Gleb Tsipursky writes in the conclusion to his original and impressively researched study, which convincingly demonstrates that socialist fun was, in being such serious business, a site of significant and exciting history. Tsipursky’s account focuses largely on official clubs, which hosted amateur cultural activities, including musical, dance, and theatrical performances, as well as lectures, celebrations, and social events that were organized primarily for, and sometimes by, young people. Based on archival sources drawn from Moscow and