

Tam T. Ngo & Justine B. Quijada (eds), *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents. A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia*. Basingstoke & New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, xi + 293pp., £65.00 h/b.

COULD THE COMMUNIST PROJECT IN THE SOVIET UNION HAVE BEEN sustainable for so long without religion at all? Paradoxically, while religion was officially condemned by the communist authorities, in ideological terms it served as a crucial point of reference for communists regardless of their geography.

The authors of this volume discuss the relationship between religion and communism, demonstrating how deeply both were intertwined. They agree that atheism remained a crucial element of the communist project (p. 2). The book covers a broad geographical area including Vietnam, Laos, Poland, China, North Korea, the Soviet Union, Russia and Kyrgyzstan. It examines how these societies experienced the communist experiment and looks at their post-1989 transformation, with a focus on the religious aspect. In the introduction, Tam Ngo and Justine Quijada express the hope of opening a new conversation on religion, communism and secularism, something which I think they have achieved in this comprehensive volume. The rest of the book is divided into two parts: 'Genealogies' and 'Creative Destruction'. In the first part, the authors discuss how the authorities instrumentalised religion for the purpose of state-building and communist society-building. The second part, 'Creative Destruction', illustrates how religion intertwined with popular practice brought about new forms of religiosity.

The theoretical framework for the authors is that Soviet state-sponsored atheism was a form of secularism and should be perceived as a historical project. Departing from this still novel viewpoint, they emphasise that such an approach could facilitate a further discussion of secularism as a global phenomenon, rather than perceiving it as something characteristic solely of the West. Moreover, they argue against looking at secularism as a monolith, but rather as a variety of secularisms produced as a result of interaction between religious practices, political reform and state-building, each with a local flavour.

According to Ngo and Quijada, scholars often do not consider Soviet state-sponsored atheist secularism as a form of secularism because of the prevalence of three assertions, which are discussed in different chapters of this book. Importantly, as they emphasise, these assertions may be insufficient and may limit the discourse on the phenomenon of Soviet state-sponsored atheism.

According to the first assertion, communist regimes forcibly repressed religious activities. As the authors note, however, religion was in fact never completely banished from the public sphere; they therefore call for a re-examination of what forms of religious activity people exercised. In other words, the communist regimes tended to incorporate religion publicly in a way that they would be able to control. By way of illustration, the chapter by Agnieszka Pasięka discusses the relationship between the Polish Catholic Church and the communist authorities, characterising it in terms of both conflict and co-existence. As Pasięka argues, the Church negotiated concessions and privileges with the communist authorities. For example, it managed to build a number of new 'sacral buildings' in Poland as a result of its reluctance to support the protests of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s (p. 75). At the same time, both communism and religion in Poland shared certain similarities: the communist authorities introduced countervailing secular rites of passage in order to create alternative 'ways of doing' for society (p. 76), including secular baptism and secular confirmation.

According to the second assertion, communist ideology can be considered similar to a religion, a view that was popular in the Cold War period. Religious practitioners also tend to explain the sudden religious renaissance after 1989 in terms of the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism. In her contribution on the Soviet Union, Sonja Luehrmann notes that 'the analogy between communism and religion remains seductive' (p. 135), but further critically evaluates this approach. As many scholars argue, the Soviet authorities did indeed adopt a quasi-religious vocabulary, yet Soviet-style secularism put an emphasis on the human rather than the divine.

The third assertion states that communist nationality politics turned religious practice into an expression of ethno-national identity. According to Ngo and Quijada, such an approach positions ethno-national

identities as just an element of religion. In their view, however, what requires further examination is the relationship between state-building and secularism. For example, in his chapter, Victor A. Shnirelman examines how the communists successfully revived neo-paganism in the USSR (particularly in Russia) through anti-religious campaigns, originally hoping to promote scientific atheism. The neo-paganism movement absorbed anti-Semitic elements and remained critical towards Christianity, and eventually it became associated with Soviet-style ethnic-nationalism. In another chapter, Grant Evans discusses the Buddhist revival in Laos. He demonstrates that in the post-socialist period, the authorities put an ideological emphasis on Buddhism as a central cultural component of national identity, just as it was prior to the 'socialist interregnum' (p. 64).

This volume certainly offers interesting insights on the place of religion within a communist project aiming for forcible secularisation, as well as on new post-1989 realities. The discussion is all the more valuable in that it enables its authors to speak with diverse voices and present various accounts based upon broad geographical case studies. These not only examine religious life in communist and post-communist societies, but also highlight certain similarities in the communist experiment with religion throughout Eurasia. The book might have benefitted more from a more comprehensive and approachable theoretical discussion of state-sponsored atheism. Yet, this small remark notwithstanding, the contributions to the volume offer fresh and thought-provoking perspectives on an approach that has recently become important to scholarship on communism and religion.

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Boris Minaev, *Boris Yeltsin. The Decade that Shook the World*. London: Glagoslav Publications, 2015, 574pp., €26.75 p/b.

BORIS MINAEV'S RECENT BIOGRAPHY OF BORIS YEL'TSIN ADDS TO A VAST Literature over the last two decades dedicated to the first President of Russia. First published in Russian in 2010, the book builds on a rich collection of data and details drawn both from existing works and the author's interviews with Yel'tsin's family members.

For political scientists trying to assess the complex, often overlooked political legacy of Putin's predecessor, it is worth knowing from the beginning that Minaev is not a scholar, but a Russian journalist and novelist. They will benefit from a well-written, accessible text and the writer's first-hand knowledge of the recent history of his country, but they will not find new challenging arguments or, more generally, a systematic analysis. Minaev is interested in the man, who he describes as both a common, typical 'Soviet citizen' and an incredible revolutionary, pioneering political figure.

The structure of the book is chronological. The first chapter rapidly sketches Yel'tsin's first 50 years spent in the Russian region where he was born and where his political career started. From the second section onwards, the reader closely follows his arrival in Moscow and the incredible ascent that made him one of the leading actors of the dissolution of the USSR and the President of the 'new Russia' for two consecutive terms and almost a decade until 1999.

Born in 1931 in the industrial city of Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk, in Soviet times), Yel'tsin initially pursued a successful local career, first in the construction sector and then as First Secretary of the Party Committee of his region. As the book shows, at the time the main traits of his personality had already emerged: Yel'tsin had an 'uncommon, impressive and overarching ability to perform' (p. 22) and was charismatic, rabble-rousing, impulsive, contradictory and intuitive. He could take radical,

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