

# POSTSECULARISM IN POST-ATHEIST RUSSIA

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## The postsecular in post-atheist Russia

Typically, discussions about secularization touch upon the fact that this process evolved differently in Europe and America, and for this reason it is common to distinguish two cases of secularization: the European (classical) case and the U.S. case. However, one more case should be added: the Soviet secularization (in the USSR and in other countries with communist regimes). This particular type of secularism is still poorly understood from an empirical and from a theoretical viewpoint. But we cannot speak about the postsecular in postsoviet Russia if we do not take into account the specificities of Soviet secularization. This question, therefore, is the first point we need to look at.

## The Soviet type of secularization

1. It was characteristic for the Soviet (communist) regime that, on the one hand, the formal legislative provisions endorsed the principle of freedom of religion. This meant that secularization was understood as a gradual process: religion was given a special place, albeit at the edge of society. On the other hand, however, by the force of the ideological nature of the Soviet regime we can speak of the existence of state atheism, forcefully imposed on the whole of society (as regards the conditions of the Soviet regime, society was virtually identical to the state). Atheism (nonreligiosity) was considered the norm, and religion (religiosity) as a relic of the past and, consequently, as deviation (to the extent that the religiosity of a "full-fledged" Soviet person was qualified as a pathology from a psychiatric perspective). As a consequence, individual religiosity became a major obstacle to a professional career and all forms of active participation in public life and activities.

Thus, if secularization in the European context meant first and foremost the privatization of religion, forcing religion out of the socio-cultural space, then in the Soviet context it meant the expulsion of religion also from the private sphere, inasmuch as from the perspective of the ideocrats any private (individual, family, group) life was considered an anti-social fact, dangerous to the state. In the Soviet situation, the private sphere was practically reduced to zero and could only realize itself in the "underground."

2. The Soviet type of secularization was practically a *suppression of religion and religiosity*. We can distinguish the following types of suppression:

- Institutional (destruction and reduction of religious organizations, religious buildings, etc.).
- Administrative (control of the activities of religious organizations, suppression and limitation of intra-institutional religious activity, repressive fiscal policy in relation to religious organizations, obstacles for believers in terms of professional careers, etc.).
- Criminal (prosecution for illegal religious activity: organized religious education, including education for children, distribution of religious literature, etc.).
- Psychiatric (forced "treatment" of believers, especially "religious dissidents")
- Psychological (public pressure on the faithful – at school, at work, in the army, the media, etc.).

In addition, the ousting of religion from cultural and educational matters through

- the reinterpretation of the role of religion in history;
- the desacralization of art (all religious content of works of art is interpreted as a "thematic");
- the silencing or criticism of religious-philosophical and theological traditions.

3. Soviet secularization put into practice a continuous violation of the right to religious freedom (individual and collective), in particular the right to openly profess a religious faith in school, university, army, hospitals, prisons and so on.

Alongside there existed, within a limited scale determined by the authorities, religious organizations and religious practices whom we could call "legitimated believers". This group was predominantly made up of citizens with the following characteristics: poorly educated, low social status, elderly people (pensioners), women (the overwhelming majority), and finally professional members of the Church in the broadest sense: not only priests but all those who worked in religious organizations (the latter were in a social ghetto).

An exception (which only confirms the general rule however) are phenomena of mass (popular) religiosity in certain regions: Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, parts of Moldova (it was precisely these regions that largely secured the reproduction of the clergy in the ROC) and the North Caucasus and Central Asia (Islam).

4. An important feature of Soviet secularization was the secularization of religious consciousness among these "legitimated" bearers of religiosity. The essence of this process consisted in the "distillation" of religious consciousness: religious meanings, values and motivations were separated from all sectors of the socio-cultural whole. It would be wrong to identify this trait of Soviet secularization with the privatization of religion in the West, because under the conditions of Soviet ideology the presence of religion in society did not diminish as result of certain socio-historical processes, but religion was explicitly sanctioned and practically forbidden.

### **The break-down of the Soviet regime**

With the break-down of the Soviet communist regime there automatically came along a lifting of all restrictions on religious life and activities. Religion emerged from the religious ghettos, to which it had been forcefully confined, and it gradually began to occupy a legitimate place within a differentiated social structure, taking that place which the European process of secularization allotted to religion.

In this sense, the postsoviet period is a period of "Europeanization" of religion and its corresponding type of "secularization": the formation of a secular (de-ideologized) state; real separation of church and state (in the pre-Soviet period the church was a state-church, and in the Soviet period it was under state control); the formation of a secular (de-ideologized) secondary and higher education.

The postsoviet "return of religion" meant not only the practical implementation of religious freedom, but also the restoration of a rich and voluminous religious consciousness (comparable to the "saturation of distilled water with salts"). In addition, the return of religion (at the initial stage of the postsoviet period) was accompanied by a public sense of guilt vis-à-vis the persecuted church and those who, through their heroic efforts, had kept alive the repressed religious heritage. However, this sense of guilt stood against a background of almost total ignorance of wider society about religion itself, its system of ideas and values, as well as its structure and specificities.

Accordingly, when we refer to the postsecular in postsoviet (postcommunist) Russia, we have to be aware that we are dealing with, on the one hand, the effects of the Soviet experience (the experience of Soviet secularization), and, on the other hand, with the emergence of Russian society from a situation of isolation from the European and global situation into the broader international and global context.

### **The postsecular in relation to the experience of Soviet secularization**

1. With regard to the postsoviet situation, one can argue that it is the return of religion into the public sphere which is one of the main features of Russia's postsecular situation. But what is specific about the postsoviet situation is that during this very same period also the restoration of the private sphere is taking place, so that religion is also returning into the private sphere (which is actually in tune with the classical paradigm of secularization). Accordingly, a special feature of the postsoviet postsecular condition is that the realization of the right of individual (private) religiosity gets public attention, becomes a subject of public debate and even a political issue (for example: the president publicly indicating his commitment to Orthodoxy). Religion returns *at one at the same time* into the private *and* into the public sphere.

This intertwining of private religiosity and public presence of religion (and, accordingly, of the "secular" and the "postsecular") is at play in a series of controversial issues today:

- School (how to ensure the right to receive information about religion in general education without violating the principles of secularism of public education?)
- Army (how to ensure the right to worship in the army without reproducing presoviet practices?)
- Prison (the same problem)
- Church and museums (how to ensure the return of religious values and artifacts of the Church, at the same time ensuring their preservation and accessibility through museum collections?)
- Property (whether to and how to proceed in the restitution of church property in the absence of property-restitution as a whole?)

All these and some other similar problems have become the subject of public debate and have even generated serious conflicts.

Accordingly, the question arises what the nature of these problems actually is:

(1) are these problems to be solved within the paradigm of secularization (as in other European countries), or

(2) are they problems specific to the postsecular situation?

2. At the same time, we should attribute to the postsecular phenomenon the presence of a more or less active religious discourse with regard to:

- postsoviet historiosophical concepts (in particular, the concept of "Orthodox civilization");
- a new political mythology (for example: Orthodoxy as a civil religion);
- public projects of a religiously-founded public morality (civil values, social ethics, economic ethics);
- discussions about the possibility of including religious elements into secular legislation (for example, Sharia norms, the religious prohibition of abortion);

- the interpretation of the relationship of church (ROC) and state in terms of "Symphony" (the words of President Medvedev, publicly, in front of television cameras addressed to the patriarch).

It is important to remember that all these phenomena take place after the Soviet experience of secularism, defined as repressive ideology, which did not leave room for any public debate on these issues (neither on the scale of society as a whole, nor in its individual sectors, including social science and socio-political thought).

3. The same ambivalence, which we can call postsoviet postsecularism, is manifested also in the public perception of the relation between religion and science, religious philosophy and the scientific worldview (scientism).

The postsoviet period has seen the growing up of new generations that have not been formed under conditions of a public consensus on the authority of science (especially in the humanities and social sciences), but in an atmosphere free from the ideologized Soviet sciences and against the background of a return to an open, public space, especially with regard to once persecuted religions. This meant low credibility of scientism and high expectations with regard to religion (both to the traditional religions of Russia as well as to unconventional and syncretic quasi-religions such as New Age). In other words, the new generations have grown up in a socio-cultural situation which is not dominated either by a secular, nor by a religious worldview and value system. This situation can be called postsecular, but, at the same time, in the Russian context, it is owed to the collapse of the Soviet regime and the end of Soviet-style secularization.

4. Similarly, also the social activities of religious organizations can be (and obviously should be) interpreted both as ways to compensate for the former (Soviet) control and repression, as well as postsecular phenomena, reflecting global trends.

5. One aspect, which should undoubtedly be considered as a postsecular feature of the current Russian (postsoviet) situation is that religious identity has become an almost integral part of individual and group identities. In this regard it serves not only as a proper religion, but as ethnic and religious identity or as an identity that indicates the cultural ownership of religion.

Therefore, the individual-social aspects of the attitude towards religion in today's Russian society could be described as follows (which is directly opposite to what was typical for the period of Soviet secularization): "Modern people of working age, of any social status, education and profession, can be religious, non-religious or anti-religious, just as well as either active or passive followers of a religion." There is no public consensus nor a dominant view according to which individual or group religiosity would be suppressed. On the contrary, at this point in time publicly declared religiosity (especially Orthodox) rather enhances social status and increases the symbolic capital of a person than declared non-religiosity. To be religious is considered not a defect, but a sign of dignity. This is true also for religiosity in public: many politicians, public figures, businessmen, generals, artists, athletes, journalists are openly religious ... more or less publicly non-religious (or anti-religious) are the representatives of three groups (all of which rather marginal at this point in time): part of the natural scientists, some pro-Western liberals; and supporter of the "relics" of Soviet consciousness. At the same time it cannot be said that religion / religiosity is dominating public consciousness. It is rather the case that any of these groups can be in a marginal situation, since there are no stable ideas about what constitutes the norm and what the deviation.

## **Conclusions**

1. The Soviet type of secularization is a special type, along with the European (classical) and the U.S. type of secularization. What is typical for the Soviet type is a formal adherence to the European secular norms and the factual violation of these norms through the suppression of religion and religiosity and its displacement not only from public but also from the private sphere.

2. The return of religion into society after the collapse of the Soviet communist regime takes place in two ways: a) through the restoration of religion in the private sphere and the transition to the European secular paradigm, and b) through participation in global postsecular processes.

In post-Soviet Russian context, these two processes occur simultaneously. The return to the situation of European secularization means, for post-Soviet society, also a postsecular process inasmuch as it is correlated with Soviet secularization.

3. At the moment, the state of general attitudes towards religion in Russia can be described as an equilibrium. In society neither religious nor non-religious or anti-religious positions are dominant. Apparently this is due both to the global postsecular processes as well as a consequence of the historical process of Soviet-type secularization.