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Chapter 9

The domestication of religion under Soviet communism

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BACKGROUND

The questions I am concerned with are both historical and futuristic. First, what happened to mainstream religions in the USSR after the 1930s when, under Stalin, they were the object of targeted attack? Second, what happens when restrictions are relaxed in the *perestroika* period, and what are the prospects for religion in post-communist society? In seeking to answer these questions I shall be concerned with 'scientific Marxism' as a mode of thought as well as the religious ideologies of Islam and Christianity as found within the territories of what was, until very recently, the Soviet Union. Because there is such ethnographic diversity within this region (for example, Humphrey 1983; Dragadze 1988), I shall restrict the focus to ritual practices accompanying life crises and illness. In exploring this field I draw principally upon Emile Durkheim's classic opposition between 'sacred' and 'profane', and show how it can be applied in contemporary communist and post-communist societies. An important subsidiary theme is the notion of 'rationality', as it used to underlie official militant atheism in the Soviet Union.

For reasons of space it is impossible here to give a full account of communist policies towards religion in the USSR, which undoubtedly shared many features with communist religious policies elsewhere.[1] Among the tasks facing the Bolshevik regime after 1917 was to reconstitute the previous colonies of the tsarist Russian Empire into the Soviet Union. Another task, however, was to mobilize populations into serving a centralized command system whose legitimacy rested on the acceptance of a particular ideology. In my view this ideology was always a botched-up concoction of *ad hoc* measures, with constraints set only by the need to *appear* to adhere to *some kind of* Leninist version of a selection of pronouncements by Karl Marx.[2]

Land and property reform ensured that the economic power base of official religious institutions was destroyed quite soon after the Revolution. A further aim was to destroy religious beliefs that could potentially compete with the ideology of the new state, and a great deal of attention was

paid to this aim. The two ways in which this could most rapidly be achieved, apart from the use of direct punitive measures against individuals, were on the one hand to destroy buildings and spaces set apart for religious devotion, and on the other hand to expound militant atheism under the banner of Marx's pronouncement that religion is the opium of the people, with all the means at the state's disposal. Let me turn now to examine the implementation of these policies in the areas where I have conducted fieldwork; namely, the Christian and Muslim populations of Georgia and Azerbaijan respectively.[3]

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND RITUAL SPECIALISTS

Before communist impact, most cultures of the USSR had specific buildings which were set apart for religious worship, where full-time, professional ritual specialists and religious teachers were located in the vicinity, and where particular behaviour by devotees was prescribed. Sometimes due to popular esteem for the quality of devotion displayed in religious worship within the building and its surroundings, and sometimes because of the distinctiveness of its architecture and the history imputed to it, the building tended to acquire an autonomous identity. As is common in the Christian Mediterranean, particular church buildings and their precincts in Georgia were popularly thought to possess divine power deriving from patronage of a particular saint or angel. The term 'popular' implies a unified set of ideas with an unspecified, mass authorship, but it is important to remember that individual interpretations may differ greatly. I was told by some Georgians that the very stones of the buildings were thought to be imbued with divine power, but by others that the presence of any 'angel' was elusive and that its physical location, apart from a vague preference for a given church, could not be defined.

My contemporary informants do not speak with one voice, and one must assume that differing views prevailed before Sovietization as well. In Georgia, village churches were virtually all destroyed and the building materials were used to erect schools, club-houses, or other community amenities. In Ghari village in Ratcha province, the wood of the church was used to build a school. When people kept on coming to touch the school walls and pray, the wood was dismantled again and moved quite some distance away (30 km), for use in the construction of a sanatorium. Where buildings were not destroyed their interiors were vandalized, with icons thrown around and windows smashed.

Among Muslims, certain mosques were imputed with specific spirituality. The burial places of holy men (and of some women, such as the tomb of the mother of Kunta Hadji in Chechnia, in the North Caucasus – see Bennigsen Broxup 1992) were believed to possess the power to channel prayers to divine sources. Particular ritual behaviour in these locations was

prescribed, including, for example, appropriate dress and the way people should comport themselves, without ever turning their back to the shrine. The status of the attendants in these buildings was revered; they were the main ritual specialists in Azerbaijani society.[4] One such special location was Bibi Eibat, outside Baku, which had a spring dating back to ancient times, remarkable in its barren surroundings. In the Muslim period this site had become the location of a shrine which was known throughout the country. In 1936 the Soviet authorities dynamited this shrine, covered up the water source with a road, and built on the surrounding land. They argued that the road could not have followed any alternative route, but in reality one suspects that the reasons for the destruction of the shrine and the concealing of the water spring were quite different. Most village mosques in Azerbaijan were either destroyed, ostensibly because the stone was needed to build roads, or deliberately assigned for other purposes, such as a cooperative shop.

Although in both Georgia and Azerbaijan (as well as in Muslim Central Asia) healing and special prayers were often performed by lay members of the public, by those whose main livelihood was derived from other sources, there were also priests and mullahs whose main source of livelihood was derived from religious practice and who were believed to be experts in their profession. In the 1930s many of these were deported as *kulaks* or simply killed, and the ferociousness of this persecution has often been understated by commentators since.[5] A situation was soon created in which there was an absence of professional practitioners. Under threat of punishment, even those religious specialists who remained in the villages were often afraid to practise their skills. Thus, during life crises or religious festivals the people no longer had access to the expertise of professional religious practitioners whose sanctity was believed to set them apart from their fellows. Their special spiritual powers could no longer be invoked. Therefore ordinary people had to adjust, but they were able to maintain their rituals in spite of the absence of sacred buildings and of the personnel which had previously been thought essential for the efficacy of their prayers.

THE DOMESTICATION OF RELIGION

I use the term domestication in two closely related senses. On the one hand, it embodies the idea of shifting the arena from public to private, from outside the home to its interior. On the other hand, it also signifies the harnessing and taming of that which had seemed outside the control of ordinary people. In this case what can loosely be called 'spiritual powers' had formerly been thought to be the domain of specialists, from which non-specialists were excluded through lack of training and sanctity. In such circumstances, domestication implies the attempt to gain more control for oneself. This must imply a shift of the boundary between 'profane' and

'sacred', and it suggests an *enlarging* of the actual mental space of the 'sacred'. This, of course, presents a paradox for the communists. Instead of rejoicing at the demise of official religious structures, they must confront a growth in the relative significance of certain domestic rituals. In comparison with previous practice, the domain of religious observance seemed to become more prominent.

The analysis is underpinned by two implicit assumptions. First, I take it that the need for tapping divine/spiritual power and for intervention in life crises continued unabated in the lives of ordinary people under communism. Second, I assume that the role of communist ideology in the form of atheist propaganda was significant, and had an impact on the way people adjusted to the new environment. The gestalt representations in communist atheism provided the means for lay people to gain sufficient confidence to take on roles previously monopolized by ritual specialists (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Gestalt representations in communist atheist propaganda

'Scientific Marxism'	*'Religion'*
'Rationality'	'Superstition', 'lies'
Full control of destiny	Submission to divine will
Creativity (new rites, new festivals)	Inertia
All-powerful, limitless scope of action	Passivity, humility
Fearlessness	Fearful
Advantage: promise of future wealth and prosperity	Present poverty (all those years of praying in the past got you nowhere)

My extensive research experience in various parts of the Soviet Union suggests to me that there was some internalization by the population of parts of the propaganda of 'scientific Marxism'. On the other hand, this 'communist religion' was not particularly successful in competing for loyalties, since the promises of prosperity did not materialize and contradictions between the alleged rationality of scientific atheism and the irrationality of Stalin's personality cult, as well as the discrepancies between slogans and reality more generally, all eroded popular faith in the infallibility of official propaganda. Let us begin by considering again the case of Islam in Azerbaijan.[6]

The rationale for the destruction of religious buildings and discouragement of religious belief and practice by communists was that people had to be liberated from the hoaxes and illusions that had been foisted upon them by previous power structures. 'Truth' rested in accepting a 'rational' world where the material world alone embodied 'reality'. This in principle implied that humankind had the capacity to control this reality: even death

and illness – the main causes for seeking divine intervention – in a bright and hopefully not too distant future would be controlled through 'scientific' means. A boost was given to such reasoning when sacred buildings were destroyed, without immediate catastrophic consequences. For example, I was told that when the shrine of Bibi Eibat was destroyed, some believers had expected a terrible disaster to afflict the whole planet. This did not happen; there was not even an eclipse of the sun. (Nevertheless, I have yet to hear an account of the destruction of a religious building in Georgia or Azerbaijan which was not accompanied by recounting the individual tragedies that afflicted those that carried out the order: premature death, debilitating illness, or some other family misfortune.)

The demise of 'sacred' space had to be absorbed and reinterpreted, not least because a new evaluation of its autonomous powers had to take place. In Azerbaijan, where stones from mosques were used to build roads to walk on, following the initial shame and shock there grew a certain fascination with the possibility of walking on them without enduring subsequent affliction. A shift in parameters took place, which emboldened previously diffident people to attempt ritual practices previously outside their scope and competence. For example, in the Azerbaijani village I have been studying, the increased part played by women is noticeable. Communists saw women as less of a threat and were more likely to turn a blind eye to their 'folk' ways than to those of men. We still do not know enough about how women were able to internalize a rationale that would encourage them to expand their role in religious practices. No doubt they had always played some role in the domestic sphere, as do women in other Muslim societies, but communist conditions gave them for the first time a more central role in the preservation of religious identities.[7] Until recently, it was considered safer and more appropriate for supplication and accompanying rituals of all descriptions to be carried out in the privacy of the home. In Azerbaijan, the cemetery vaults of people thought to have been holy have lately become the focus of religious devotion. Such shrines are mostly tended by women descendants of the holy person commemorated, and their blessings are often specialized: for example one *pir* shrine is considered good for liver disease, another for heart disease, and so on.

In Georgia lay people, sometimes self-appointed, came to undertake some of the ritual activities that used to be performed by priests, not only funeral rites but also those accompanying the ritual sacrifice of sheep on feast days. The running of village affairs was taken out of the hands of the village elders and handed to secular commisars. Often, however, these elders were now called upon to perform religious rituals, at least unofficially. In Ghari village, a tree, always considered holy (Elijah's tree), became the focus of clandestine visits. Indeed, although in the early days villagers had not been indifferent to beginning a new way of life under a communism which promised so many material benefits, as most of these remained mere

promises, and as despair over illness and death and the desire for auspicious circumstances for birth and marriage remained as pressing as ever, the performance of old rituals to accompany special events continued. I cannot go into a full discussion of 'tradition' in this chapter, but as so often happens one is faced with a simultaneous increase in ritualistic observances and the disappearance of any knowledge of, or concern with, the underlying theology and moral teaching.[8]

Inside homes, which were always liable to official inspection, areas set aside for ritual were rare, and had to compete for space in usually overcrowded dwellings. When a person prayed over another or consumed ritual foods, it had to be done in the usual living quarters, and it was difficult to exclude other family members. Death rituals were the most significant. Villagers preferred their dying relatives to be brought back from hospital so that they could perform the necessary rituals in secret at home (Dragadze 1988).

In a general way, therefore, without presuming fully to explain the continuance of religious practice, we can trace the development of a shift in emphasis in the division between 'sacred' and 'profane'. The domestication of religion continued in this way until the mid-1980s and the onset of *perestroika*.

LIBERALIZATION AND REHABILITATION

Stalin had begun to loosen controls over religion during the Second World War, as a means of intensifying emotional loyalty to the state. The restoration of holy sites and religious toleration increased slowly thereafter, but resources in terms of manpower and buildings were so scarce that the trend towards increased domestication continued in the manner outlined above. In Armenia, exceptionally, the official church became the focus of renewed national pride and identity. Elsewhere, the farcical aspects of officially sanctioned religious structures persisted. For example, the Muslim magazine *Muslims of the Soviet East* was printed for export in Tashkent in fifty languages, not one of them indigenous (no Uzbek or Tajik versions, for example). In Georgia, religious festivals such as Easter were celebrated in the main cathedral in the capital Tbilisi, but drunken youths would be encouraged by the Government to enter and disrupt proceedings. Pilgrims would flock to particular churches, such as Alaverdi in eastern Georgia, to hold picnics on the site of former village churches; on these occasions the recreational theme usually seemed stronger than any spiritual content.

When Khrushchev allowed the Chechens and Ingush to return to their homes following their deportation by Stalin, they discovered that their family tombstones had been used for pavements. In some cases the writing was still visible, and families concerned were eventually allowed to take them away, to erect them again in the cemetery. For them, as for the other

peoples of Caucasia, the period of reconstruction of both national and religious identities began simultaneously and in earnest only under *perestroika*. The Chechens are a particularly interesting case. In deportation, as in other periods of adversity since their conquest by Russia in the nineteenth century, they found succour in their Sufi brotherhood practices. Only recently, however, have they been able to rehabilitate the site of the burial ground of the mother of one of their founders, and openly perform a *Zikr* (male-performed prayer chant and dance) there. Using prayers in their native language, this public display of devotion in 1990 revealed a complex set of concerns, the overriding one being not so much religious identity as the restoration of their national rights.

In other parts of the Caucasus, notably in Armenia and Georgia, religious practice is going through a similar transitional stage. Its public aspects in urban centres where churches have been reopened reflect a drive for reasserting national identity and claiming divine protection for the collectivity of the nation. In Georgia, since the autumn of 1990 when a non-communist government was elected, led by a keenly religious President, Christian images are replacing communist ones, and the President often ends rallies with the cry 'St George is with us!' In Azerbaijan, however, public displays of religiosity have been tempered by the fear of being branded 'Muslim fundamentalists' in an insulting way by the Moscow Government, the Armenians, and, through them, by the entire Western world. The burial service of the victims of the January 1990 massacre in Baku was attended by the Sheikh Al Islam, but he was also accompanied by the Chief Rabbi and a local priest of the Russian Orthodox church. It is possible that religion in the republics with majority Muslim populations is being cynically exploited by the authorities in Moscow as a pretext to justify armed intervention, on the grounds that it is essential to combat 'the ugly face of Muslim fundamentalism'.

In the village I studied recently in Azerbaijan the mosque has yet to be rebuilt, but it does figure in the new plans for village development. The position is very similar in Ghari village in Georgia. In both villages, in different languages and imagery, people have told me time and time again that the erection of a sacred building would attract a spiritual blessing onto the village. They feel it would also provide a meeting place for the community as a whole, the communist-built 'club-house' in both cases having been patronized solely by village youth. The communist attempt at creating a new form of village 'communitas' clearly failed and was unable to establish any deep roots in the societies. Today, the expression of this communitas is linked by most villagers to the recovery of a religious focus through building a place of worship at a suitable site.

These sentiments may be taken at face value to indicate continuity with the pre-Sovietization period. My impression, however, is that at least some attributes of these buildings no longer have meaning for the villagers. One

very important new dimension, it appears, is the national symbolism which the villagers now associate with the construction of every mosque or church.[9] In Georgia I have even heard a prayer of supplication emphasizing national identity: 'God bless this *Georgian* boy'. The question of a return of significant numbers of official religious specialists, and the effect this will have on the perceptions and self-understandings of lay communities, is a complex one, and I am not yet ready to speculate on the final answers.[10] A further shift in the boundary between sacred and profane may be expected as some roles are abdicated by the laity in their homes and transferred back to the public arena. It can be predicted with even greater confidence that the idiom of nationalism will strongly colour religious expression throughout the now disintegrating Soviet Union.

CONCLUSION

At the outset I stated that my modest aim was merely to assess the usefulness of applying Durkheim's notions of sacred and profane to the transformations of religious practice that have taken place in the past seventy years in the Soviet Union. Through the study of documents, interviews to obtain retrospective accounts, and observations of current practice over more than two decades, I have concluded that the concept of domestication is a useful one for understanding changes in religious practices under communism. Contrary to 'secularization' ideas, which it must be admitted have not yet been adequately examined in communist conditions, I have preferred to treat the 'degree of religiosity' as a constant. The refashioning of religious life in Georgia and Azerbaijan owes more to the specific impact of communism, with its coercive practices and enforced ideology, than to the march of industrialization. The refashioning is continuing now as these countries seek to consolidate their escape from communist colonial structures, and the most profound influences upon religious practices today would appear to be the nationalist ones. Durkheim's opposition may still prove useful as the successor states in the Caucasus adapt traditional religious symbols to become the new sacred icons of the nation.

NOTES

1 See Walters (ed.) (1988) for a useful survey of the diversity of Christian churches within socialist Eastern Europe. Comprehensive coverage of all religions in these countries has for many years been provided in the journal *Religion in Communist Lands*, published by Keston College.
2 For example, the definitions of the nation advanced by Stalin had to masquerade as Lenin's own: see Kryukov (1989).
3 Although drawing also on fieldwork carried out in Georgia between 1970 and 1973, my main sources for this chapter derive from fieldwork done in 1989–91

in Georgia and Azerbaijan as part of a research project, 'Rural families under Gorbachov in Georgia and Azerbaijan', funded by the ESRC.

4 I emphasize here the setting apart of these buildings in Azerbaijan because it has been argued by some experts on Islam in the USSR that not only can any house serve as a mosque, but that no building ever has special status (T. Saidbaev: personal communication).

5 For example, by Lane 1981.

6 Two-thirds of Azerbaijani Muslims are Shia and one-third Sunni, but for the purposes of this chapter I shall not dwell on their differences.

7 See Sorabji (1989) and Bringa (1991) for detailed investigations of the religious roles of women in another communist Muslim society, Bosnia. In 1979 Tajikistan I was abandoned by my 'minder' as soon as I expressed interest in the ethnography of women: this was taken to be proof of the political insignificance of my project.

8 Hence there was no general recognition of any contradiction when Georgian women never sewed or washed their hair on Sundays for religious reasons, whilst undergoing very frequent abortions.

9 Of course I have to be wary in interpreting what I, as an outsider, am told on this score (the common refrain is 'We must have a mosque because we are Azerbaijanis', or 'We are Georgians so we must have a church').

10 I am currently embarking on a five-year research programme, centred upon the study of rituals, jointly with the Department of Caucasian Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Georgia.

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Chapter 10

Socialism and the Chinese peasant

Jack M. Potter

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party set out to modernize rural Chinese society and to change radically the social lives of Chinese peasants. As members of a quasi-religious revitalization movement, under the charismatic leader Mao, basic-level party cadres struggled to transform landlord-dominated, impoverished, and war-torn 'feudal' Chinese villages into prosperous socialist cooperatives based upon collectivist and egalitarian values, within a new modern, industrialized, socialist state.

The party's programme of revolutionary change in the countryside progressed through three main periods: (1) the initial Maoist period of land reform, social reorganization, and collectivization of the 1950s, which eliminated the old landed elite and established party committees in the countryside, culminating in the enormous Great Leap Forward communes of 1958; (2) the period of Maoist collectivist society, lasting from 1961 through the early 1980s, based upon the 'three-level system' in which the basic levels of organization were the production team, the brigade, and smaller, less radical communes ; and (3) the post-Maoist period, from the early 1980s to the present, during which the Revolution was routinized: agriculture was decollectivized, private internal markets were reinstituted, contacts were re-established with the world capitalist system, temporary labour migration of peasants was permitted for the first time in several decades, and the emphasis in policy was changed from revolutionizing the society to focusing on immediate economic prosperity.

What has been the effect of four decades of revolutionary socialist praxis upon the traditional structures of rural Chinese society? How does present rural China compare to pre-Revolutionary China? Have Chinese peasant society and culture been fundamentally changed? If so, how? If not, what are the continuities, and why have they persisted? What is the changing relation of the peasantry to Chinese society as a whole? Most importantly, how have all these changes affected peasant lives?

Here I present evidence from the results of my fieldwork in Zengbu brigade (now called Zengbu xiang, or 'township'), a rural settlement of over