

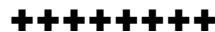
Towards Comprehending the Post-Atheist Situation: The Memory of the Martyrs in Eschatological Perspective

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Abstract

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The author discusses the “radical orthography” and “political grammar” of the Soviet Union whereby the word “God” was only ever permitted in the lowercase: god. Sergey Averintsev’s article “Eschatology” in the *Soviet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is reviewed to demonstrate such a “degradation of mysticism into politics”(Charles Péguy). This ostensible dethroning of God was thought to elevate man and his social progress, but the author reviews the tales of destruction and death inflicted on many Christian martyrs, beginning with the execution of Metropolitan Vladimir Bogoyavlenski of Kyiv in 1918. As the post-Soviet years continue to advance, the stories of such martyrdom are increasingly being forgotten, or never learned in the first place, by younger generations. Drawing on the thought of the late Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh together with Alexander Glagolev, the author insists that martyrdom must always be understood as an eternally relevant act of love.



In Europe for the last several years, we have been hearing about the actual or impending arrival of many “post” situations: some persistent voices have emerged announcing that the post-secular epoch is coming; others have said that we – especially in Eastern Europe – are living in a post-atheist time or a “post-Stalinist” atheism; and still others have attempted to initiate a new direction in discussing “post-Constantinian” Christianity.

“The drama of atheist humanism” widely described by Henri de Lubac is closely connected with our topic, although I have to emphasize here a considerable difference which can be seen by asking two questions: first, how does the gulag change the character of the drama? Second, has the breakdown with humanism in USSR state politics (independently of whatever was officially stated) brought a radical turn to atheist “drama”? In considering these questions, one should note that I deliberately do not mention *individual* forms of atheistic thinking that different people used to hold and still hold worldwide after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I will also not be able to give attention to the phenomenon of how the USSR, as a regime that had atheism as its official ideology, has been generally ignored by believers and non-believers alike in the wake of its collapse.

As an introduction to the topic at hand, we may consider the paradox not of Radical Orthodoxy but, so to speak, of “radical orthography” and the censorship attendant upon it. For many decades the atheistic censorship of the Soviet Union inculcated a systematic prohibition: the word “god” should not be written with a capital letter. The ban on writing that fatal word with a capital letter was a sign of the ideological dictatorship of a ruling party, an indicator of its “ideocracy.” Violation of the taboo in the years of Stalinism was accepted neither in the press nor in scientific journals. It was possible for the life and the career of a person to be completely destroyed if he had not accepted this lesson of “political grammar.” The border of political atheism was strictly guarded by orthographic customs officers – communism had its own “fundamentalist” police.

The atheism of the USSR was not only orthographic but also imperial. The Soviet empire introduced radical changes into all aspects of its internal life and influenced similar developments in that of its satellites throughout Europe and elsewhere. It enshrined its atheistic ideology in the Brezhnev Constitution of 1977 (article 52) which continued the tradition of the Stalin Constitution of 1936.

A consequence of this official ideology was, of course, the widespread and vicious antireligious terror inflicted by the Bolsheviks from 1917 onwards. The execution of Metropolitan Vladimir Bogoyavlenski of Kyiv on 25 January 1918 initiated the beginning of mass repressions in which thousands of clergy, monastics, and lay believers were jailed or killed outright. When the campaign of expropriating church belongings (as an excuse for supporting starving people) was in full swing, Lenin wrote to the members of Politbureau in his secret letter of March 19, 1922: “the more representatives of reactionary bourgeoisie and reactionary clergy we succeed in shooting dead in this connection the better it will be for us. It is exactly now that we have to give lesson to this kind of public in such a way that they do not dare even to think of any resistance for a couple of decades.”¹

Atheism not only persecuted Christian believers but also, incredibly, sought to “kill” the object of their faith, namely God Himself. On 30 January 1923, Trotsky and Lunacharsky participated in a public session of political tribunal for sentencing God to death! The political tribunal of the communist state sentenced not only “the god of philosophers, theologians and non-educated masses” but also the abstract theories of atheists of the old regime.

In such a context, we can perhaps begin to comprehend now the experience of the confessors of faith, deeply connected with the experience of the martyrs of the first centuries of Christianity but at the same time different in many ways. It is important to continue to study them not least because many in our day are inclined to think that the past is past and therefore irrelevant. New generations coming of age today are the first

¹ Вестник РСХД 98 (1980): 54–57, in: Материалы и документы / Сост. Герд Штриккер. Книга 1 (1995): С. 156 (Book 1, 156).