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RELIGION AND MAGIC IN SOCIALIST AND POST-SOCIALIST CONTEXTS II

Historic and Ethnographic Case Studies of Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Alternative Spirituality

With a foreword by Anita Stasulane

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Foreword:
Religion and Magic behind the Iron Curtain

Anita Stasulane

This volume explores perspectives and foundational issues, and their implications in the study of religion and magic in socialist and post-socialist contexts. As religion in the former Soviet Union is usually interpreted as "a uniquely post-atheist phenomenon, [but it is] inseparably linked with the Soviet past" (Menzel 2013, 269), in the following pages I would like to discuss what the religious policies were in the USSR and how religion and magic were able to survive under the Soviet regime.

After WWII, a specific political and cultural situation developed in Europe, which directly impacted religion, as well as other areas of life. German National Socialism was defeated in 1945, which freed Western European countries, but many Central European nations, the Baltic States and Eastern Europe ended up under communist regimes. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which were already occupied by the Soviet army in 1940, remained part of the USSR, while Central European and Eastern European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) became part of the Soviet sphere of influence. The Communist Party in each of these countries became the sole political formation to govern, all parties adopting Marxism-Leninism. Behind the Iron Curtain, religion was framed as a relic of the past and an opium-like escape for the poor from economic misery and oppression. As late as the 1980s, scientific atheism in USSR universities taught antiquated theories about the evolution of religion: religion progressed through various evolutionary stages of development, beginning with the most primitive expression (animism), while subsequent development found expression in ancestor worship,

polytheism, and finally in monotheism. Monotheism was postulated as the belief in a masculine, paternal deity developed with the rise of *patriarchal* culture.

In order to eradicate religion, the Communists first repressed the leaders of religious organizations and the most active members of congregations. How this was implemented can be shown through a specific example: In Latvia (1944–1965), there were two authorities responsible for religious matters: (1) the Council Representative for the Affairs of Religious Cults and (2) the Council Representative for Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Council for Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church was created in 1943. Because other Christian denominations and religions (Judaism, Islam and Buddhism) also operated in the territory of the USSR, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was created in May 1944. In nearly every Soviet republic (except the Armenian SSR), the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was established, subordinating separate institutions. (Krūmiņa-Koņkova 2015)

Because the USSR cared, to some extent, about its image in the eyes of Western democracies, the main goal of the communists' religious policy was to create the illusion of religious freedom (Spasov 1951). Consequently, the communists decided not to close religious organizations, but to tightly control them and to ban the creation of underground religious groups (Talonen 1997). The representatives of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults operated in the Soviet republics according to a single instruction issued in early 1945, which indicated that the representative was to inform the government about religious cults and their position and activities within each republic; to provide opinions on issues related to the operations of religious organizations; to monitor correct implementation of Soviet legislation; to carry out record-keeping and registration of operating religious associations and groups, churches, houses of worship, as well as clerics. The Government Commission for KGB Research conducted these investigations. The instruction was secret, which is why it was forbidden to refer to it in the representatives' discussions with clergy and all reports, letters, or any

other kinds of documents from the representative mentioning the instructions, were also kept secret (Krūmiņa-Koņkova 2015). The representatives' discussions with clergy had to be secret as well: when various organizational issues were established, the provision of any written directions, *memoria* or instructions was also forbidden, meaning there would be no material evidence of the state interfering in the internal affairs of the religious organization. This in turn implied that the separation of state and religion would be kept in place long after occupation.

The activities of the Church were controlled, information on the political views of priests and their activities during the Nazi occupation were collected, and this evidence was used to identify priests who were seen as anti-Soviet elements. In 1949, each congregations and clergy member in Latvia was been registered by the regime. Each priest was tracked through a personal file, which contained information on his activities: a form with important biographical information, their life story, complaints, various proceedings, references, and press publications which were usually meant to reveal a priest's vices, anti-Soviet sentiments and other compromising information. The intent here was to help discredit an anti-Soviet priest in front of their congregation and society, which was often aided through publishing defamatory articles about them in the national press. These practices were an attempt to cleanse clergy of "anti-Soviet elements", and continued until the death of Stalin (1953). The post-Stalin Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR eventually issued an amnesty decree. This allowed many sentenced individuals to be released from detention, to have their sentences reduced by half, their criminal records erased, the restrictions on their rights revoked, or their criminal procedures terminated. The amnesty did not apply to those who had been sentenced to five years or more for counter-revolutionary crimes, so it often did not apply to clergy or political prisoners.

The attitude towards religion did not change when Nikita Khrushchev came to power (1894–1971) or under the *Khrushchev*

Thaw (1950s to 1960s). The only thing that changed were the methods by which the Soviet authorities tried to eliminate the Church's influence on society: physical violence against clergy was mostly replaced with psychological intimidation and propaganda campaigns. Regardless of the difficult post-war Soviet economy and the arrest of many clerics, as part of the attempt of Soviet authorities to repress religion, the work of the largest Christian denominations and various religious organizations continued. The Communist Party's decree *On Large-Scale Deficiencies in Scientific Atheist Propaganda and on Measures for its Improvement* (1954) documented the fact that the activities of the Church and various religious sects had increased and so did the number of USSR citizens who carried out religious rituals (Krūmiņa-Koņkova 2015). The Communist Party instructed Komsomol, trade unions and educational institutions to undertake "anti-religious work", and to systematically and steadily re-educate believers individually. It should be emphasized that this was not a short-term campaign, but a systematically implemented long-term policy meant to control, if not eradicate, religion. To help ensure this, Latvia, for example, issued a decree entitled *On Regulation of "The Introduction of Soviet Traditions and the Fulfilment of Legislation by Religious Cult Control Committees" approval* (1964)—meant to form special administrative boards and executive committees in every town, district and village. Their task was to establish new Soviet traditions, thus discrediting older traditions, and to supervise how Soviet legislation on religious cults was implemented locally (Krūmiņa-Koņkova 2015). According to the decree, these local administrative committees had to control whether religious organizations, clerics and functionaries were implementing Soviet legislation on religious cults, and had to oversee how community organizations, cultural and educational institutions were implementing anti-religious propaganda.

As it became apparent that religion could not be eradicated through repression or anti-religious campaigns, communists changed religious policies. In other words, there was an attempt to use religion to the advantage of the Soviet regime, as Westerners

trusted clerics more than Soviet diplomats and functionaries. In order for this to happen, they needed to have people loyal to the Soviet authorities in key positions within the Church—new clerics raised within the Soviet system who were interested in career opportunities, who could then be used not solely for disinformation, but also for recruiting and espionage especially among the émigré communities. Clerics agreed to collaborate with the KGB for practical considerations: this opened up the opportunity to go on foreign trips, to study theology in the West or to serve larger congregations. A refusal to collaborate with the KGB would often mean the end of a career.

The Soviet regime tried to restrict the number of believers not just through repression, but also through placing a heavy tax burden on congregations and issuing laws that banned religious activity. How was it possible to practice religion under these circumstances? The readers should bear in mind that there were national differences within the Soviet sphere of influence. For example, in Poland and Lithuania, Roman Catholics practiced religion actively, while in Russia, the Orthodox Christians were re-educated in atheism, at least in part, or intimidated. The situation in different denominations could vary even within the same country. For example, in Latvia, the communists desacralized mainly Protestant (Lutheran, Baptist, Adventist and Methodist) churches, setting up clubs, sports halls, warehouses, grain drying-kilns and shops within them, whereas services continued to be held in the majority of the Roman Catholic and Christian Orthodox churches. The church was the only place where the clergy were allowed to preach, and only during services. Religious education in schools was not allowed: in Soviet Latvia, the Criminal Code (1945–1990) prescribed criminal liability for teaching religion to people under 18. On Sundays, during church services, local Communist activists often arrived to check who was attending church. If a minor was observing the mass, the school was informed and teachers had to undertake further measures on atheist education. As a result, the family became the only place for passing on religious traditions and religious

holidays were observed secretly only within a restricted, trusted circle of relatives. This applied not only to Christians, but also to all other religions. In fact, the battle of the Soviet regime against religion achieved its virtual elimination from the public sphere.

Compared to institutionalized religion, religious movements operated underground, and were, therefore, more difficult to identify and control. Esoteric groups (Masons, Spiritualists, Theosophists, Anthroposophists etc.), had activated, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) in Russia, as branches of the Western European esoteric movement or had collaborated closely with Western European groups. Esoteric groups became equally isolated during the Soviet years and had a hard time operating in states where the esoteric raised suspicion (Burmistrov 2012, 52). Esotericists continued to gather in small groups and worked mostly with oral esoteric traditions, as publishing esoteric texts was too dangerous, and access to esoteric literature published in the pre-Soviet period was restricted, even with the *Samizdat* activities (Samizdat publications were secretly written, copied and circulated literature). For this reason, little is known about esotericism in the areas of Soviet influence after WWII, with the only historical sources being memoirs published after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and KGB documents.

Despite warring atheism, the USSR society did not become less religious, but *differently* religious: "Soviet civilization defined itself as a purely rational society, yet its cult of the rational was taken to such an extreme that one could talk of it in terms of a *rationalistic religion*" (Menzel 2013, 270). Even so, the 1960s marked the rejection of rationalism, with artists manifesting strongly against it—but the rejection was also visible in everyday life, which the Soviet regime was less able to control than other spheres. Interest in Eastern religions, UFO-logy, attempts to contact departed spirits, experimentation with drugs and efforts to expand consciousness, all conflicted with the official Soviet ideology and facilitated the development of an esoteric underground. In the attempts to create a monolithic and easily controllable Soviet society, the

communists exploited the concept of collectivism. Meanwhile, individualism dominated within the esoteric underground groups. *Spiritual* dissidents turned inwards, guided by individualism, and dismissed external authority, showing preference for internal experiences. Even though the USSR had a different socio-political system than Western countries, *spiritual* processes were similar. Even behind the Iron Curtain, there were obvious turns towards the individualization of religion (Jagodzinski 1995), rejections of traditional authority (the Church), and personal searches for spiritual experience with an emphasis on free will. The paradox was that consumer culture (a characteristic of Western countries), and the culture of fear (which dominated in the spheres of Soviet influence), had one thing in common: the rejection of materialism. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, post-material (Inglehart 1990) values emphasizing self-expression, subjectivity and individual experience came to the fore, replacing the material values which ensured the basic necessities of life. Post-materialism created a fertile ground for esotericism, which offered "personal empowerment, metamorphosis, and liberation through illuminated knowledge (gnosis), and, as such, the developing of one's potential as a human being in relation to the cosmos" (Patridge 2013, 115).

The esotericism, which dominated the USSR's spiritual underground, interested the elites, mainly artists and intellectuals, but did not appeal to broader societal strata. However, even those who did not consider themselves to be *spiritual* dissidents and accepted Communist ideology, strived for *primal experiences*: dreams, visions, voices, tongues, magical healing, a sense of divine presence, notions of destiny, fate, sightings of ghosts, inexplicable spiritual phenomena, i.e., "unexpected vivid encounters that are considered to be other than normal" (Hexham, Poewe 1997, 59). These experiences allowed contact with the supernatural, creating changes in attitudes towards the material world, and turning towards the discovery of the unseen world. In this way, the existing elements of once traditional or folk religion were also reborn and gained more importance, especially a concern with ancestors, spirits and magical

healing. Those who experienced the collapse of the Soviet regime may still remember the hugely healing sessions, of Anatoly Kashpirovsky (Born 1939), broadcast on Moscow television and throughout the USSR. The post-Soviet boom in healers in the early 1990s provided evidence that spiritual transformation and healing were one important focus for citizens of the ex-USSR. The heightened interest in the spiritual aspects of health, healing and spiritual transformation continues to characterize post-Soviet society. Some social scientists saw this emphasis on spirituality as a source of stability in people's lives, an opportunity to maintain social solidarity and a way of maintaining a sense of meaning and identity in difficult times. However, spirituality has another aspect—it includes personal and individual transformation, which has attracted the attention of psychologists (Westernik 2013). The spiritual transformation phenomenon has also gained the interest of other social scientists (Snow, Machalek 1984; York 1995; O'Sullivan 2012), and post-socialist countries are ideal for such studies.

Yoga and healing movements were another way that Soviet citizens sought spiritual transformation. Yoga became popular in the 1970s as a means of developing personal abilities, but had to be practiced in secret. At the same time, articles about yoga as a way of maintaining one's health through physical exercises were published in popular science magazines. Healers, mainly women, practiced folk healing methods, which also included chants and magic, that often had been passed down from generation to generation. During the Soviet period, healers had to operate in secret. The Latvian word *vārdotājs* translates not only as a performer of ritual magic but also one who is able to achieve the desired result with the assistance of spells. This magical figure works similarly to a magician, fortune-teller, oracle or witch. During the Soviet era, these healers operated mainly in the countryside and their passing down of traditions were largely confined to the realm of the oral. In the post-Soviet period, healers have begun to work in urban areas and to advertise themselves as psychics or fortune-tellers. Folk beliefs and practices commonly classed as 'magic' were deeply rooted in

Baltic, Central European and Eastern European cultures, which meant they were able to survive the period of the Soviet regime and to flourish after its collapse. While some 20th century research claims that religion and magic are declining (Wilson 1966, Thomas 1971, Bruce 1995), 21st century sociologists and researchers of religion have rejected this claim (Stark and Finke 2000, Harrison 2008, Warner 2010), especially in areas that were once dominated by Soviet ideology. In explaining how magic survived the "disenchantment" of the world, Wouter J. Hanegraaff concluded that practices traditionally classed as 'magic' have always been relied upon and that the spontaneous human tendency of participation in these traditions is part of human nature (Hanegraaff 2003:378).

The collapse of the USSR opened Central Europe, the Baltics and Eastern Europe to outside influences and enabled the transmission of new forms of religion and magic. Based on extensive historical and ethnographic research, this volume uses a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodologies to examine different forms of religious expression in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Russia, Romania, Estonia, Serbia, Latvia and Kyrgyzstan. The freedom of religious expression is a novelty in societies suppressed for fifty years or more by repressive regime, and these societies are currently experiencing an interest in non-conventional forms of religiosity and spiritual expression.

The opening article of Larisa Jasarevic explores recent and current enchantment with and devotion to *Apis mellifera:* she focuses on two practitioners of phyto- and api-therapy and argues that investigating what is magical about bees in popular science is worthwhile. The paper of Zlatina Bogdanova discusses the transformations of a local tradition: the feast originated in the Greek neighborhoods as a commemoration of the heroic death of a young bride has been continued by a Bulgarian community. Next, Sibelan Forrester explores the ways in which traditional culture and authority can be experienced and imagined in post-modernity: she shows that Russians still believe in the effects of *zagovory* and de-

scribes the contribution that folk genres have made to popular culture. Gabriel Girigan explores the evolution of magical practices and religion during the socialist and post-socialist times: he discusses specifically to the conversion to Pentecostalism of a Roma minority. Reet Hiiemäe's paper on magic in Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia illustrates how magic provides a subjective sense of safety and hope over time. Danijela Jerotijević reflects on beliefs in supernatural harm in contemporary Serbia: she shows that representations of a person with supernatural abilities are complex and depend on various psychological and social dimensions. Iveta Leitane's essay on transformations within scholarly discourse in Latvia during the transition from socialism to post-socialism takes up question on the interplay of scholarship, politics, the religious search after the Soviet collapse, and underground resistance in the 1980s. René Provis' chapter addresses contemporary expressions of religious and quasi-magical ritual practices in Kyrgyzstan: his argument on the spiritual hybridity reflected in *bata* (white or good blessings) practices helps us move beyond the political and security-centred analyses that have dominated contemporary studies in the region. Ioana Repciuc focuses on the differences between religion as prescribed and religion as practiced as they are expressed in the traditional celebration of winter holidays in contemporary Romania. The closing chapter, by James M. Nyce, Alexandra Coțofană and Jessica Pollock, returns to issues related to magic and witchcraft as the authors raise questions about the role witchcraft has in Romania today. Each of these studies brings up the complex role of magic, witchcraft and magical figures in communist regimes during and after the Cold War. The volume presents a number of fascinating studies on magic in socialist and post-socialist contexts and raises some interesting questions for anthropological research in the Central Europe, the Baltics and the Eastern Europe.